



# More than the sum of its parts:

Collaboration & Sustainability in Arts Education

*Thomas Wolf & Gigi Antoni*



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## Preface

As the old saying goes, “necessity is the mother of invention.”

Today, nonprofit arts education organizations across the country find that to meet the challenges of the 21st century, they must innovate. Some of the most promising solutions are generated by those willing to work differently by working together. Partnership enables organizations to make the most of each other’s strengths and thereby better serve their constituencies. *More Than the Sum of Its Parts: Collaboration and Sustainability in Arts Education* compiles inspiring examples of thriving partnerships whose creative strategies not only multiply the benefits of arts education but also help sustain their own work for years to come.

The National Guild for Community Arts Education, Big Thought and WolfBrown are honored to bring you this resource. Designed for anyone looking to initiate or strengthen relationships with other agencies, *More Than the Sum of Its Parts* presents basic practices and models for achieving strong partnerships within all types and sizes of communities. This book outlines the theory and practice behind different levels of partnership, from simple collaborations to complex community-wide organizational systems. We offer them as living proof that any nonprofit can create an effective partnership once it understands the key components and requirements of such an undertaking.

We hope this book will enable nonprofit arts education organizations to more deeply engage their communities; gain access to greater expertise, credibility and funding; and increase sustainability through collaboration.

*More Than the Sum of Its Parts* is itself a collaborative effort, and we could not have completed it without the willing participation of dozens of nonprofits and the impeccable design work of M/C/C.

We strongly believe that collaboration enables nonprofit arts education organizations to discover new, powerful ways to generate maximum impact and solidify their place in their communities for the near and distant future.

*Gigi Antoni, President & CEO, Big Thought*

*Jonathan Herman, Executive Director, National Guild for Community Arts Education*

*Thomas Wolf, Principal, WolfBrown*



Christina Cultural Arts Center, Wilmington, DE

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# Introduction

## The Arts and Community: What's at Stake?

It is 6:30 on a Tuesday morning in a medium-sized city in the United States.

- Mayor Davis has an 8:00 a.m. breakfast meeting with the city's police department to discuss a sudden rise in gang activity.
- George McIntyre, the CEO of the largest corporation in town, is preparing to chair a Chamber of Commerce meeting focused on attracting a major employer to the area.
- Kendra Jones, a clinical psychologist working with HIV-infected adolescents at the local public hospital, is wondering how many of her patients are going to show up for group therapy this afternoon.
- Sam Brown, a teacher, is worried about how his students will perform on a standardized test they are taking later today.
- The oldest of the five individuals, nonagenarian Gillian Rosen, is trying to remember the names and ages of each of her 21 great grandchildren.

Our five individuals may not appear to have much in common, but each helps shine a light on important community issues:

- Mayor Davis is concerned about public safety.
- George McIntyre is focused on local economic development and the need for a competitive 21st century workforce.
- Kendra Jones worries about the difficulties in delivering quality health care.
- Sam Brown is conflicted about what kind of teaching leads to good student outcomes.
- Gillian Rosen reflects on one of the greatest needs among her elderly peers – staying mentally engaged and agile.

By day's end, each of these individuals will have found a way to use arts education and creative learning to address the community issue he or she is thinking about.

- Mayor Davis will embrace a new mural initiative involving at-risk youth.
- Mr. McIntyre will encourage the Chamber to get behind a new, school-based creative learning initiative that combines arts and science education.
- Ms. Jones will invite a music organization to develop a song writing workshop that encourages her patients to express their pent-up feelings about their disease.
- Mr. Brown will sign up for professional development sessions that will help him incorporate the arts and artists into his efforts to teach basic skills to his at-risk students.
- Mrs. Rosen will participate in an oral history project that partners young people with the elderly to help them reconstruct the histories of their families and their community.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Although their names have been changed, the people above are real-world examples whose stories collectively reflect three key challenges of our time:

1. Community needs often seem overwhelming.
2. Financial resources at the local level have been shrinking.
3. New, creative and cost-effective solutions need to be found to solve the problems that concern people today.

This book sees these challenges as opportunities for organizations working in the arts and cultural education.

- These organizations can address many fundamental community needs very effectively.
- By partnering with other community organizations, they can often find affordable solutions for solving societal problems.
- Such partnerships will often enhance the effectiveness of the participating organizations and help them do well by doing good.

## Our Hypothesis

This book is based on a simple hypothesis:

When arts education organizations work together with other entities to address broad community needs they become stronger, widen their impact and become more relevant and sustainable.



Big Thought, Dallas, TX

## Background of the Book and Its Contents

### Where did this hypothesis come from?

In late 2009, consultants from WolfBrown conducted a year-long study focused on sustainability among community arts education organizations. Commissioned by the National Guild for Community Arts Education and funded by the Kresge Foundation, the project provided an opportunity to learn in depth about the work of these organizations, their impact and their needs. It also allowed ample time to study the issue of sustainability and, in particular, to gauge the extent to which collaborations of various kinds contribute to it. The result of the work was a theory of sustainability and community originally presented in a Guild publication<sup>1</sup> and summarized in the above formulation. The study offered the opportunity to test the theory in action and to begin to explore how it might be put into practice.

Meanwhile, the staff of Big Thought in Dallas was collaborating with and learning from communities around the United States in order to develop large-scale collaborative systems linking arts education organizations with other nonprofit and municipal organizations (schools, city governments, social service organizations, libraries, parks and recreation departments) and funders (both public and private). The strategy was to ensure that these partnerships would address major community concerns. Once again and from a very different frame of reference, the issues of community partnerships and sustainability in arts education were made manifest. In essence, Big Thought arrived at the same hypothesis about community, partnership and sustainability through its programs and experiences as WolfBrown did through its research.

These two strands of related work have led to the writing of this book. The ideas, concepts and examples that follow are intended to demonstrate how a theory becomes practice. It is a primer on how organizations that offer arts education and creative learning programs can forge partnerships to address community needs and become more sustainable.

- Chapter 1 outlines the importance of the community dimension.
- Chapter 2 provides examples of partnerships from the simplest to the more complex.
- Chapter 3 discusses the opportunities and challenges of mergers and acquisitions, including why and when it is appropriate for two or more organizations to become one.
- Chapter 4 describes the development of larger, community-wide systems involving scores of organizations and agencies focused on addressing community goals.
- Chapter 5 outlines how to get started and be successful in establishing the kinds of collaborations described in the book.
- Chapter 6 addresses the necessary support including professional development, evaluation, funding, advocacy and effective administration.
- An Afterword provides some additional core principles critical to long-term sustainability. Each chapter ends with a list of key questions to highlight important concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wolf, Thomas and Jane Culbert, "Collaborating for Sustainability and Impact," *GuildNotes* (Spring 2011), pp. 8-9, National Guild for Community Arts Education, [www.nationalguild.org/getmedia/a232d732-0f1f-475a-80f2-8e2f2bf58f85/GuildNotes-Spring-2011\\_web\\_1.pdf.aspx](http://www.nationalguild.org/getmedia/a232d732-0f1f-475a-80f2-8e2f2bf58f85/GuildNotes-Spring-2011_web_1.pdf.aspx)

## A Word About the Examples

Several real-life examples are mentioned throughout this book. In almost every case, actual organizations are named and web addresses are provided for more information.

Where anonymity was requested or the example outlines a practice that should be avoided, real names were not used. The authors recognize that situations can change and organizations and programs evolve, but that the value of real world examples outweighs the potential for future inaccuracies. Wherever possible, we have included photos from organizations described in the text. We have also used photos from other exemplary community arts education organizations.

## Frame of Reference: Arts Education and Creative Learning

The frame of reference in this book is arts education and creative learning.

However, the theory and practice of community partnerships and their contribution to sustainability extend beyond the arts and humanities to the nonprofit sector as a whole. Examples include art museums, symphony orchestras, theater companies, literary organizations, organizations devoted to history, as well as countless other nonprofits in spheres of activities outside the arts and humanities.

## Acknowledgement

Many people and organizations made this book possible.

We would like to thank the National Guild for Community Arts Education, the Kresge Foundation, the staffs of WolfBrown and Big Thought and the many organizations cited in the publication.

In particular, we would like to thank the following individuals by name:

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Concord Community Music School, Concord, NH

# Chapter I

## The Community Context



City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, Philadelphia, PA. Photo: Steve Weinik.

# “Art Saves Lives...

What drives us is the opportunity to help life triumph over the forces of despair. We just happen to be good at painting murals. ”

– City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

These words, taken from the core values of the Mural Arts Program, introduce a fundamental concept that underlies this book’s hypothesis. Organizations are stronger when their work is framed in a broad community context and when their missions and activities address basic community needs.

The name of the Mural Arts Program may be all about art, but as its core values make clear,

*“Art Ignites Change. Art heals, art unites and art changes minds in a convincing fashion. Art drives the agenda. Great art is never silent, can’t be ignored and serves poorly the status quo.”*

Here is how the organization’s executive director, Jane Golden, puts it:

*“Our murals are concerned with reflecting our community’s aspirations and struggles so that people begin to see tangible evidence that things are changing and that the organization really cares.”*

– Interview, November 18, 2011

Since its founding in 1984, the Mural Arts Program ([www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org)) has been listening to the messages of its community and responding with innovative social, behavioral health, educational, and restorative justice programs and murals that give voice to citizens from disparate backgrounds. The organization began as the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, an effort spearheaded by then-Mayor Wilson Goode to eradicate the graffiti crisis plaguing the city. The Anti-Graffiti Network hired muralist Jane Golden to reach out to graffiti writers and redirect their energies from destructive graffiti writing to constructive mural painting. Since that time, the Mural Arts Program has produced more than 3,600 murals that have become a cherished part of the civic landscape and a great source of inspiration to the millions of residents and visitors who encounter them each year. At the same time, the program has worked with neighborhoods to clear trash, plant community gardens, provide work training and make the arts more than an outside presence in life but an entry point to the heartbeat of communities throughout Philadelphia.



City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, Philadelphia, PA. Photo: Steve Weinik.

## Community Context: Why Does It Matter?

The Mural Arts Program has tailored its activities and programming to meet community needs since its inception. There are abundant examples of how other arts education agencies are reframing their activities in a broader community context, both in terms of identity and programs.



Flint School of the Performing Arts, Flint, MI

These organizations understand that community context matters because the arts do not exist in a vacuum; they influence participants' academic performance, self-esteem, relationships and interpersonal skills and even enhance brain function. Arts organizations can build upon these benefits formally or informally to become more relevant to communities and the issues that concern them.

One local ballet company for years offered the same educational program for fourth grade school children. It featured an annual production of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* with supplementary instruction in the form of a workbook that teachers used in classrooms to teach the history of ballet. In time, public schools abandoned the program. It was too expensive and did not address what many educators saw as their greatest need – finding enrichment programs that contributed to core learning

skills. As a result, the only students that continued to attend the program came from area private schools. Because almost none of them could be considered at-risk, the local corporation that had underwritten the program pulled its funding.

However, the story didn't end there. An experienced educator redesigned the program as a vehicle that could address state educational standards. Students still attend a performance of *The Nutcracker*, but members of the ballet company now work with teachers on curriculum that uses dance to help children master mathematical concepts and develop imagination skills. Corporate leadership has become re-engaged with the program since it addresses what they consider to be core 21st century workforce challenges. This flexible and enterprising ballet company became more relevant to educators and funders by reframing its activities to address community needs. In the end, the students win.

## Higher Value Civic Outcomes

Communities grapple with complicated problems that often revolve around a fundamental concern – how to produce and support healthy and successful citizens.

There are many individuals and organizations that contribute to this vision – effective schools, hospitals, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, families and various civic institutions. Arts education organizations are another route through which community goals can be achieved. The challenge is figuring out how the activities of multiple constituencies align.



*Dallas Children's Theater, Dallas, TX*

Consider arts education organizations that offer summer programs and activities at other out-of-school times. Now think about a hot-button issue in education: closing racial and economic achievement gaps. One strategy is to address the differences in opportunities between children who have access to many learning activities outside of the school day and those who do not. Some organizations are finding matches between community needs and their activities and designing programs to address these issues directly.

We know that outside of school time, some children's families can afford guitar or voice lessons, dance class or theater camp and some, simply put, cannot. This inequality of access provides an advantage in terms of readiness to learn. By middle school, "summer learning loss" (the cumulative loss in learning engendered by a lack of learning opportunities over the summer) can leave some students trailing their peers by a full academic year. Some arts education

organizations are looking at this as a new opportunity to offer compelling programs during the summer, after school and/or on weekends. Out-of-school-time learning through the arts has been proven as a strategy for closing achievement gaps. Arts organizations, in partnership with parks and recreation departments, libraries, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs and schools, are finding success with such programs.

“get the arts  
back into the  
drinking water”

Arts education organizations must become serial empathizers, putting themselves in the shoes of potential partners. What do parks and recreation departments want for their programs and participants? What do schools care about? What about parents? If constituents want a safe place for children to thrive, can the potential partner organizations create a “no-wrong-answer” environment so prevalent in the arts? Arts education programs, properly designed, can be well supported when the transformative power of the arts is seen through the lens of community impact. This may be the best way to “get the arts back into the drinking water” in our communities and in turn sustain arts education organizations so they may do their best work and affect the most people.

## Framing the Value Proposition

When arts education organizations begin to see their work through a wider lens of making the community a better place to live, it's important for their messages to reflect their values.

Thus the statement "We want kids to get a high quality arts education experience" can become "We want young people to engage in their communities, taking responsibility for the places where they live." The same can be true for arts education experiences for people of all ages.

### Lessons in Learning

#### The Village of Arts & Humanities in North Philadelphia

The Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia ([www.villagearts.org](http://www.villagearts.org)) won the Coming Up Taller Award (now known as the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards), the nation's highest honor for arts and humanities programs, for its innovative approach to arts education.

The organization's mission statement is compelling: "To support the voices and aspirations of the community through providing opportunities for self-expression rooted in art and culture. The Village inspires people to be agents of positive change through programs that encompass arts and culture, engage youth, revitalize community, preserve heritage and respect the environment." And among its many inspiring core values is this one:

*"We believe that the strongest leadership is found within the community. Therefore, our programming supports and grows youth and adult residents into community leaders."*

### Lessons in Learning

#### The Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit

The Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit ([www.mosaicdetroit.org](http://www.mosaicdetroit.org)) provides opportunities for young people to achieve excellence on stage and in life. Among its programs is the Mosaic Youth Ensemble, which provides nine months of free intensive training in acting and vocal music to 80-100 young people, ages 12-18. They work with professional actors, writers, musicians and designers, rehearsing after school and, on weekends, performing original productions. These programs, which disproportionately serve at-risk youth, are intended to promote a positive image of Detroit while empowering young people to fully realize their potential, helping them develop the kind of life skills that will allow them to become leaders in their communities. It is interesting what Mosaic regards as success. It boasts a 95 percent high school matriculation and college attendance rate among its participants, far above national and local norms, while at the same time maintaining high artistic standards, serving the art form and community needs.

Marwen, Chicago, IL. Photo: Mayra Palafox.



Marwen, Chicago, IL

The activities of these organizations range widely, and each encapsulates a different vision of the future. But a common theme runs through all of them. Young people will be the leaders of tomorrow, so we must invest in them. By doing so, our communities will become better places.

## Marwen in Chicago

### Lessons in Learning

The Chicago-based Marwen ([www.marwen.org](http://www.marwen.org)) was founded in 1987 and is dedicated to supporting the development of Chicago's youth in grades 6-12 through free visual arts. Its curriculum features an exceptional art program taught by professional artists, offering painting, drawing, 3-D/ceramics, photography, video/animation, design and multi-disciplinary arts.

Marwen also offers substantial youth development activities: college study trips, employment experiences and internships, individual college counseling, scholarships from leading colleges reserved exclusively for eligible Marwen students and sustained support from alumni mentors and Marwen staff for participants that attend college.

## Key Questions

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1. What are some of your community's greatest challenges and aspirations?  
What do people care about? What are the greatest needs?
  2. How might your organization address those needs?
  3. Who are some logical partners with whom you might work?
  4. How can your mission statement reflect a more compelling case for your work framed by broader civic outcomes?
  5. What values can you articulate that support this mission?
-

# Chapter 2

## Organizational Partnerships



KAIROS ALIVE! Minneapolis, MN

## Organizational Partnerships<sup>1</sup>

The first component of the theory of sustainability and impact offered in this book emphasized the importance of the community context in the mission, programs and activities of arts education organizations.

The basic idea in chapter 1 was that in addressing broad community goals, organizations become stronger and serve their constituencies better. In this chapter, we begin to focus on the second component of the theory – the idea that organizations often become stronger when they work together toward a common goal. We begin that discussion by looking in depth at one mechanism for doing so: organizational partnerships.

### Lessons in Learning

#### West Concord Union Church and the Concord Conservatory of Music

Two organizations in an historic Massachusetts town were faced with very different challenges. The first was a church with a wonderful old building that stood mostly empty every day of the week except Sunday. The parishioners faced an increasingly high heating bill each year as well as the cost of maintaining an old building. Common sense might have led them to sell it. But selling was not an option – the building had for generations been the heart and soul of their congregation and they did not wish to give it up. The other organization was a recently established community music school that had grown rapidly and needed teaching studios, administrative space and, very importantly, a large performance space with good acoustics and a piano.

Meet the West Concord Union Church and the Concord Conservatory of Music, two organizations that found one another and, for a period of time, maintained a partnership that served both well. While the conservatory's ([www.concordconservatory.org](http://www.concordconservatory.org)) ultimate aim was to have its own building, the interim solution did not require a large outlay of cash (which it did not have) and met most of the space requirements the school had at the time.

In the meantime, the church used the new infusion of cash to invest in the necessary renovations, consulting with the conservatory to ensure that these improvements helped meet the school's needs as well as its own.

<sup>1</sup> An organizational partnership is a relationship between two or more agencies and/or organizations characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility for the achievement of specified goals. Each of the organizations in such a relationship retains its own identity and structure but works with the other to achieve the goals.

## Why a Partnership?

There can be many reasons to enter into a partnership:<sup>2</sup>

### Financial

It is sometimes more cost-effective for two or several organizations to work together than it is for each to operate independently. Think about the church and the community music school with which the chapter opened. Each derived financial advantages from working with the other – a revenue stream for the church and an affordable building for the school. Similarly, several organizations sharing back-office functions can derive financial advantages by achieving economies of scale. Some grants are only available to partnering organizations. Sometimes new streams of funding are opened up. An organization might not think about accessing a neighborhood renovation fund but given a new function as a facility provider, funders might very well see the importance of providing an additional room that could benefit several organizations in the community.

### Enhanced effectiveness

A second reason to enter a partnership is that each organization may bring specialized skills that the other needs. One may be strong in music education, the other in theater. A partnership between them would allow a summer program with kids performing in musical theater. In another example, one organization might work effectively with public schools while another might bring expertise in advocacy. In some cases, one organization brings access to certain public-sector decision-makers while others can help reach certain private-sector funders.

### Wider reach

Sometimes two or more organizations can reach many more constituents by working together. Think of a theater education organization partnering with a social service organization and a library on a program where each gains constituents, members and volunteers.



Turtle Bay Music School, New York, NY

<sup>2</sup> Some people use the word “partnership” generically to describe any type of connection between organizations including mergers and community-wide systems. Our definition is narrower, and we differentiate those other forms of connectiveness in subsequent chapters.

## Deeper impact

Often two or more organizations working in partnership can achieve more than each of them working independently could accomplish. An arts organization partnering with a literary organization and a library might be able to provide a reading curriculum that significantly improves reading scores among students while neither organization could do so independently.

## Visibility

Often arts organizations with stupendous programs struggle to get the word out to schools or parents about the resources that they provide. This is why arts partnerships in various cities include such things as shared branding, joint advertising buys, shared ticketing services and cost-effective expert marketing advice.<sup>3</sup>

## Legitimacy

If parents receive a flier for an art program at XYZ community center, they might be wary of sending their child to an unknown entity with which they have had no experience. Yet if the community center has partnered with a local corporation, well-known nonprofit or a visible family foundation, the program gains legitimacy and trust. In other cases, partnerships across sectors (art and health, for example) can introduce new clients or audiences who have had experience with one sector, but not the other.

## Survival

There are cases where the only way an organization can survive is to join a partnership.



Providence Youth Arts Collaborative, Providence, RI. Photo: Jori Ketten.



Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, Topanga, CA

<sup>3</sup> The Artsopolis Network (<http://artsopolisnetwork.ning.com>) supports a growing number of communities dedicated to promoting arts, culture and entertainment. Originally established as a project of Arts Council Silicon Valley, Artsopolis emerged from the nation's leading center for technology and innovation to meet its own community's need for promoting local arts and culture. The website's local success led to the establishment of the Artsopolis Network to provide other communities around the country with the same opportunity to effectively promote the activities of their cultural organizations. Network members benefit from years of experience in culture marketing and web development, as well as the collective wisdom and best practices of other network members. In some cases, arts education providers have used Artsopolis to promote their offerings.

## Whose Goals?

The nature of a partnership requires that each of the participants agrees to work toward a set of goals.

In the church-conservatory partnership example with which this chapter began, the two organizations that came together had different goals – the church wished to maintain and improve a building; the conservatory needed space for its program. But each could serve the other's goals and its own through the partnership. In some cases, though, the goals align even more closely.

### The Providence Youth Arts Collaborative in Rhode Island

### Lessons in Learning

The Providence Youth Arts Collaborative (PYAC) is a partnership of six nonprofit community-based arts organizations that use arts education as a strategy to empower the youth of Providence and greater Rhode Island. All share a vision of Providence as a city in which youth are a driving force in a thriving arts and cultural community. They believe that a new generation of creative thinkers and leaders can be developed who have participated in youth arts programs that exhibit best practices. And all believe that the partnership can prove to be an effective vehicle toward realizing this vision.

They have come together around a shared goal: to improve the effectiveness and build the capacity of their arts education programs. Together they work on professional development, increasing visibility for their programs and fund raising. Over time, the PYAC ([www.communitymusicworks.org](http://www.communitymusicworks.org)) has come to serve students from a variety of neighborhoods as well as diverse citizens who otherwise might not have become part of the art renaissance occurring in Providence.

### PYAC consists of six organizations that are very different in many ways. They are:

1. **AS220 Youth**, a transitional arts program that employs and engages Rhode Island youth but focuses specifically on those recently released from the state's juvenile detention facility, the Rhode Island Training School (R.I.T.S.).
2. **Community MusicWorks**, a string quartet in permanent residence in an urban neighborhood that teaches music to young people, performs locally, mentors their students and organizes community events for entire families.
3. **Everett Dance Theatre**, a professional dance and multimedia company that builds long-term relationships with urban youth through professional mentorship, including opportunities to create and perform.
4. **Manton Avenue Project**, a program for youth living in Providence's Olneyville neighborhood, modeled on New York City's 52nd Street Project, in which adult theater artists team up with kids to create original theater.
5. **New Urban Arts**, an interdisciplinary arts studio where emerging artists and high school students practice powerful mentoring relationships as they work toward lifelong creative practices.
6. **Providence City Arts for Youth**, a community-based arts center that connects 8- to 14-year-olds with free, professional arts learning experiences that are inspired by the creative process of art-making – in visual arts and design, performing arts and creative writing – and the exploration of ideas and concepts that shape our communities and everyday lives.

There are all kinds of reasons why these organizations could have felt that their differences were too great to bridge. Yet as different as these organizations are, they have found value in working together toward a shared goal. No single organization is in charge, there is no corporate structure and the entity does not have its own website. Rather, it is a powerful concept and a set of activities that are mutually beneficial to all participants.

## When Is a Partnership Right? The Six-Question Test

On considering a partnership, an organization should ask six key questions:

1. What are the capabilities of the other potential partner(s) to help our community and to help us, and will they enhance our effectiveness?
2. Are we capable of and prepared to offer what the potential partner(s) wants from us?
3. Do the finances work to our mutual advantage?
4. Can we gain more community trust and visibility by working together?
5. Can we do what we do better?
6. Can we get along?

If the answers to most of these questions are strongly positive, then a partnership should be explored. However, if the answers are tending negative, caution should be exercised. This is especially important when there is a lot of pressure being applied by a funder, board members or staff to enter into a partnership. What might seem like a very exciting opportunity in the short-term – securing much needed funds or accessing constituents – can easily backfire in the longer term. It is always best to step back and make a sound, rational decision.

## Understanding Partnerships

There are three types of partnerships that are particularly germane to our discussion.

Ranging from the simplest type of connection and involvement to the deepest and most involved, these are:

- Vendor relationship
- Consortium
- Institutional partnership

### Vendor relationships

At the most basic partnership level is a bilateral vendor relationship. Many organizations that have entered into these arrangements hardly think of them as partnerships. They are arrangements that are useful when an organization requires a specialized service – financial management or computer repair, for example – and there is another organization, either for-profit or nonprofit, that can provide that service cost-effectively and at a high level of quality. Generally, one organization brings money to the partnership and the other delivers expertise and/or specific services.

Some examples are administrative in nature – a financial services company doing bookkeeping or a computer service bureau maintaining equipment. Others may be programmatic – for example, some community music schools contract with nonprofit or for-profit entities to provide packaged early childhood music education programs. In the latter case, the schools find that they can purchase higher quality programs for less cost by entering into a partnership rather than designing and running the program themselves. Similarly, an arts education organization that offers residencies to public schools may contract with a provider to train and offer other professional development services to its corps of artists and performers. In still other cases, like the one with which the chapter began, an organization looking for space enters into a relationship with an institution that can provide all or part of a building.



The Baum School of Art, Allentown, PA

Why is it important to even describe vendor relationships in discussing partnerships, since they are a routine way of doing business?

- Organizations may staff up to provide themselves with services in-house that could be provided at a higher level of quality and/or less expensively if a partner were found.
- Organizations may go to the cost and trouble of developing an expensive program when there are better and cheaper alternatives from others.
- Organizations may pursue real estate options like purchasing or leasing a building when a better low-cost alternative is available through a partnership.

Certainly, organizations need to take the time to do the proper analysis and comparison of the options. But they also need to consider one of the additional advantages that such partnerships often bring – the fact that they are usually reversible. That is, if the services provided do not work out as planned or if, in time, the organization wishes to change the arrangement for any reason, there is generally a lot more flexibility to exit the arrangement than if staff has been hired or a building has been purchased. In a period when scarcity of resources is an issue for most organizations, avoiding unwanted infrastructure and staff or even a costly building should be a high priority and vendor relationships can often provide this. Additionally, if an influx of donations or a new program opportunity arises, vendor relationships can facilitate quick growth with an experienced partner when many new demands are required.

## Consortia

A second type of partnership is a consortium. These are similar to vendor relationships in many ways – they are often built around the idea of saving money in administrative areas, for example. But whereas vendor relationships involve two entities – a provider and a recipient – consortia are more complex, often involving three or many more participants. Cost sharing can be a primary goal as can quality of the services when multiple organizations come together, but there are often other compelling reasons to come together, as was the case with the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative cited earlier.

## Lessons in Learning

### Tennessee Aquarium Creative Discovery Museum Hunter Museum of American Art

Chattanooga is home to a national model of a cost saving consortium originally involving three institutions located near one another in the city's Riverfront District. The Tennessee Aquarium ([www.tnaqua.com](http://www.tnaqua.com)), the Creative Discovery Museum [a children's museum ([www.cdmfun.org](http://www.cdmfun.org))], and the Hunter Museum of American Art ([www.huntermuseum.org](http://www.huntermuseum.org)) were the original partners and it was both their proximity to one another and their common interest in improving administrative operations and the visitor experience that brought them together.

Originally, the partners shared services in four main areas of operations: human resources, finance and accounting, information technology and marketing (although each institution maintains its own marketing department). Later, joint retail purchasing was added to the shared services.

The benefits of these shared services and staff have included cost savings, gained expertise and increased credibility in the community and among visitors. In 2011, when the Chattanooga History Center ([www.chattanoogahistory.org](http://www.chattanoogahistory.org)) announced its intended move to the Riverfront area (where the others are located), the decision was made to invite that institution into the consortium.



Creative Discovery Museum, Chattanooga, TN

Again, the organizations in a consortium (like the one in Chattanooga) could come up with many reasons why they are different. They are very different in size, with the Aquarium being the giant and the Hunter and Creative Discovery Museums being much smaller but comparable in size and budget. But it was precisely because of the Aquarium's excess capacity that the consortium was possible in the first place. And, as occurs so often in a partnership, once the institutions started working together, they found new ways to cooperate and build on the arrangement.

## Institutional partnerships

Institutional partnerships provide additional layers of connection between the participants and a higher degree of oversight. While each continues to retain its identity, often the partnership involves some kind of shared governance arrangement.

### The Gadsden Cultural Arts Foundation and Etowah County, Alabama

### Lessons in Learning

The Gadsden Cultural Arts Foundation was founded in May 1984 in order to provide, maintain and operate a cultural arts facility for the citizens of the City of Gadsden, Etowah County and surrounding communities in Alabama. The Hardin Center for Cultural Arts, ([www.culturalarts.org](http://www.culturalarts.org)) under the direction of the Gadsden Cultural Arts Foundation, opened in 1990, and today more than 100,000 people visit the exhibits, performances and functions held at the center each year.

The Hardin Center is home to:

- Three galleries that feature a wide range of changing national and local exhibits
- Centerstage Presents, which sponsors more than 30 concerts per year
- Imagination Place Children’s Museum, located adjacent to the Hardin Center for Cultural Arts in the historic Kyle Building, which reaches thousands of children through museum visits and educational outreach
- The Gadsden Community School for the Arts, which offers instruction in ballet, lyrical jazz dance, strings, woodwind, brass, voice and more
- The nationally celebrated Etowah Youth Orchestras featuring 200 talented young musicians
- Gadsden Reads (a community One Book literacy project)

While each of these organizations retains its own identity, they are all under the umbrella of a shared services structure and one board of directors (although each has a sub-committee with an advisory board). The Gadsden Cultural Arts Foundation is the oversight body that provides the governance function and serves as the provider of shared services.

The Hardin Center and the Gadsden Cultural Arts Foundation offer an example of a creative public/private cost-saving partnership that provides shared space as well as other administrative services to several organizations. The center, which is a renovated downtown department store and an adjacent building, is owned by the City of Gadsden. The city reimburses the center for all utilities (including telephone) and provides a major grant for operating support. City support for this effort is part of a larger economic development effort, not only to bring people to the downtown area, but also to improve the quality of life in Gadsden and make it a more attractive community in which to live. The city’s interest would have been unlikely if a single entity in the partnership had tried to embark on this project alone. At the same time, the joint structure has allowed the many separate entities to save money and improve operating results (including establishing an endowment and cash reserves).

Institutional partnerships are, at their foundation, a pragmatic opportunity to join the analogous missions of two or more organizations. By designing programs or activities that are flexible enough to serve differing agendas but cohesive enough to promote a broader goal (e.g., offering a community center and an economic development engine for the city), institutional partnerships are able to:

- Attract new people to the participating organizations
- Offer higher quality programs tailored to the community
- Utilize joint marketing to increase their visibility
- Bring more prestige
- Attract more funding

To achieve these outcomes, however, the participants must commit to overcoming certain obstacles. They must agree that the missions of the discrete institutions are consistent with a joint set of community-driven goals. Organizations whose mission is to deliver high quality arts education to the community at large will continue to do so, yet their expertise or programmatic offerings are also a strand of another, larger goal. The end game, as defined by communities themselves, utilizes the knowledge and programs of a wide range of partners not only to serve communities, but to change them.

### Multi-disciplinary and cross-sector partnerships

Partnerships can occur *within* a single arts discipline or within a single sector like the arts. In these cases, alignment of mission and programs can be fairly easy to achieve, because the core programs and values are generally similar. But some partnerships cross disciplines (visual art, music, theater, media) and others cross sectors (music and health or theater and juvenile justice), bringing the ability to incorporate powerful resources that address multiple community needs.

## Lessons in Learning

### Sitar Arts Center Washington, DC

Sitar Arts Center ([www.sitarartscenter.org](http://www.sitarartscenter.org)) provides multi-disciplinary arts education to the children and youth of Washington, DC in what is described as “a nurturing, creative community where young people discover their inherent talents and gifts.” Fostering personal and artistic growth through the visual arts, music, drama, dance, digital arts and creative writing, the center offers after-school, weekend and summer classes to more than 800 students a year, 80 percent of whom come from low-income households.

What is most unusual about Sitar is that more than 100 talented artists volunteer their time each week to teach and inspire the center’s students in a state-of-the-art facility. Sitar works with a number of partnering arts organizations such as the Shakespeare Theatre, Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Washington Ballet, the National Symphony Orchestra and Washington Performing Arts Society. These organizations provide teaching staff as well as free admission to performances for Sitar students, access to master classes and performance/exhibition opportunities for students. This model of teaching and other services has ensured the ongoing sustainability of the Sitar Arts Center, allowing it to provide its offerings to underserved populations even in difficult economic times.



Sitar Arts Center, Washington, DC

## Service Learning Adventures of North Texas (SLANT)

### Lessons in Learning

Service Learning Adventures of North Texas, known as SLANT ([www.myslant.org](http://www.myslant.org)), began in 2009 when the North Texas Super Bowl XLV Host Committee invited Big Thought of Dallas, Texas (a creative learning organization) to design and manage a youth service initiative. Originally named SLANT 45, the initiative was designed to inspire youth to take up the challenge of improving their neighborhoods and communities in unique and creative ways. From creating an anti-bullying campaign and collecting food for pets in animal shelters to planting a community garden and producing a school-wide health fair, young people were empowered to tackle a variety of challenges in their schools and communities. After they completed their projects, each of the students made a reflective piece about the work they'd accomplished which was exhibited across North Texas. By the time the Super Bowl kicked off in early 2011, 44,140 youth had logged more than 445,000 hours of service to their communities. Because of the overwhelming success of SLANT 45 and an increasing interest expressed by program participants, the program was continued on a local level.

Big Thought, Dallas, TX



## Carnegie Hall Musical Connections Program

### Lessons in Learning

Carnegie Hall is one of the world's most storied cultural institutions presenting the world's greatest performing artists. Through its Weill Music Institute, it offers a variety of educational and community engagement programs. In one of these programs – Musical Connections ([www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Musical-Connections](http://www.carnegiehall.org/Education/Musical-Connections)) – Carnegie Hall partners with Jacobi Medical Center, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, and other institutions to bring music to audiences in acute need that would otherwise have very limited if any access to high quality live musical experiences.

In each case, Carnegie Hall works with the partner to assess what its goals for the programs are. These partnerships involve layers of input and support from the overseeing public agency, including agency staff, administrators and artists. For example, at Jacobi, one of the hospital's goals is to bring its health care message of preventive care to its neighboring Bronx community. Musical Connections concerts have been combined with health fairs involving flu shots, diabetes counseling, blood pressure screenings and other services and with a local farmer's market on the Jacobi grounds that teaches residents about healthy eating habits and provides locally grown produce. Other Jacobi-based activities and song-writing projects are intended to reduce pain and stress among patients and to promote bonding among pregnant teenagers and their newborns.



Carnegie Hall Musical Connections Program, New York, NY  
Photo: ©Jennifer Taylor/courtesy of Carnegie Hall.



Community Arts Center, Wallingford, PA

Cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partnerships can be powerful for many reasons. They can play to a broader audience of constituents and supporters, they can access multiple funding streams, they can enhance visibility, and they can often address multiple community aspirations and goals. Each of the participating organizations can be enriched significantly through contact with professionals from different areas of activity, giving them opportunities to grow and develop their skills.

But there are special challenges as well. The professional language spoken by those in one area and those in another is often quite different. Ways of working vary and the environments are sometimes not conducive to joint activity (e.g., the hospital may not have an ideal performing space or activity room for art activities). Most important, institutional priorities can be harder to align (e.g., artistic versus health). Adequate planning time needs to be budgeted to work out these differences. But the results can be very compelling and powerful.

### Private versus public sector partnerships

Partnership can be entirely among private (non-governmental) organizations, they can be public sector partnerships (including municipal agencies, school districts and/or other governmental units) or they can be hybrids of public and private. Some people prefer private sector partnerships because, often, decision-making is simpler and quicker. Public sector decision-making can often involve multiple and time-consuming official layers of review and approval. This private sector flexibility is no small thing, as enterprising entrepreneurs can attest. But as private partnerships grow, the need for increased funding, especially in the case of those partnerships that depend on contributed income, can make them more difficult to maintain. As costs rise, there may be questions of who will pay for what and how much each partner will pay. There can also be questions about competition for funding and whether existing sources of funding for one partner will be cannibalized by the partnership itself.

Public sector partnerships bring a different set of advantages and challenges. A public sector partner can transform a modest programmatic partnership into an ongoing community mainstay. By joining with city institutions, the public school district or a community college system, the partnerships can operate within an ongoing tax-based system, one that can help the partnership become more permanent with ongoing dedicated funding. It can also provide unmatched opportunities for reaching constituents and bringing major resources of various kinds to the table.

## Kingsborough Community College with New York City Mayor's Office of Media & Entertainment

### Lessons in Learning

When Kingsborough Community College ([www.kbcc.cuny.edu](http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu)) partnered with the New York City Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment ([www.nyc.gov/mome](http://www.nyc.gov/mome)), the College's modestly-funded media education program was able to offer a very attractive internship for credit to a group of students looking for high-level training. What made it especially appealing was that the city agency provided a skilled professional producer to oversee the project and brought in members of the Editors Guild and Cinematographers Guild to offer additional advice and guidance. Though many of the students worked at regular jobs outside of school, the project was organized in such a way that they could complete the internship. Their assignment was to cover arts and cultural organizations in Coney Island and produce three- to five-minute edited segments that were of sufficiently high quality that the city agency broadcasted the material on its TV channels.

For the students it was a unique opportunity that came with school credit, exposure and important material for their resumes. Kingsborough benefited from access to resources that it never could have afforded or attracted on its own. The city agency got access to highly motivated students, equipment and instructional space at the college, additional donations of equipment from the guilds and an important outreach project that served its constituents – students, local arts organizations and television viewers. As the director of the city agency put it, *"Among other things, it created a sense of community while providing high-level professional training. AND we got good media content out of it. That is my vision for what a public partnership between education and good local community television should look like."*

Despite the many advantages of partnerships involving public entities (whether exclusively public or hybrids with private organizations), there can be special challenges with respect to demonstrating results. When the measures and metrics that are being used to evaluate the program change or new reporting requirements are instituted by newly elected officials, the partners can be held to outcomes that they never agreed upon and that may not suit the program activity. Arts education organizations may be asked to demonstrate improved student performance on standardized tests, for example, or, in the case of partnerships with institutionalized at-risk youth, lower recidivism rates.

While these are worthy goals, they can be difficult to realize, especially in the short term. Great care needs to be taken in not overpromising on outcomes that are unlikely to be demonstrable.



Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit, Detroit, MI, Photo: Jim West.

Finally, any partnership – whether private, public or hybrid – needs to be prepared to address specific challenges that are endemic to groups working together. There may be questions about who gets credit for the good things that come out of a partnership (as in the case of cost efficiencies or improvements in program quality). Some partners may disagree about who will control the messages going out and whether credit will be properly shared. If one of the partners is a much larger institution, there can be questions about whether the larger one can be kept from dominating the partnership. Or there may be questions about whether the higher-ups in the larger organization are aware of the details of the partnership, whether there is buy-in and whether the partnership will be secure. Nearly always there are bureaucratic issues: will the partnership activity get buried in the administrative process of the larger organization and/or will the smaller one have the capacity to deliver?

With organizations as with people – the more of them that are involved, the more complicated the relationships. But with organizational partnerships, as so many have learned, the advantages are so great, it is worth facing such challenges.

## Key Questions

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1. Are there things you are doing now that could be done better through a simple vendor relationship? If you do not know, are there people in your organization who have the expertise and time to help you explore the question?
  2. What are some other areas where you see potential for a more extensive partnership? What are the main advantages – financial, enhanced effectiveness, wider reach, deeper impact, visibility, credibility or survival – that would be derived from such a partnership?
  3. Are there candidate organizations you might approach to explore the idea of a consortium or an institutional partnership? What are the potential pros and cons of working in partnership with these organizations, based on the six-question test given in the chapter?
  4. Is your organization currently involved in partnerships? Based on the concepts and examples in this chapter, how can they be strengthened? Should some of them be dissolved?
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# Chapter 3

## Mergers and Acquisitions



DreamYard Project, Bronx, NY

## Lessons in Learning

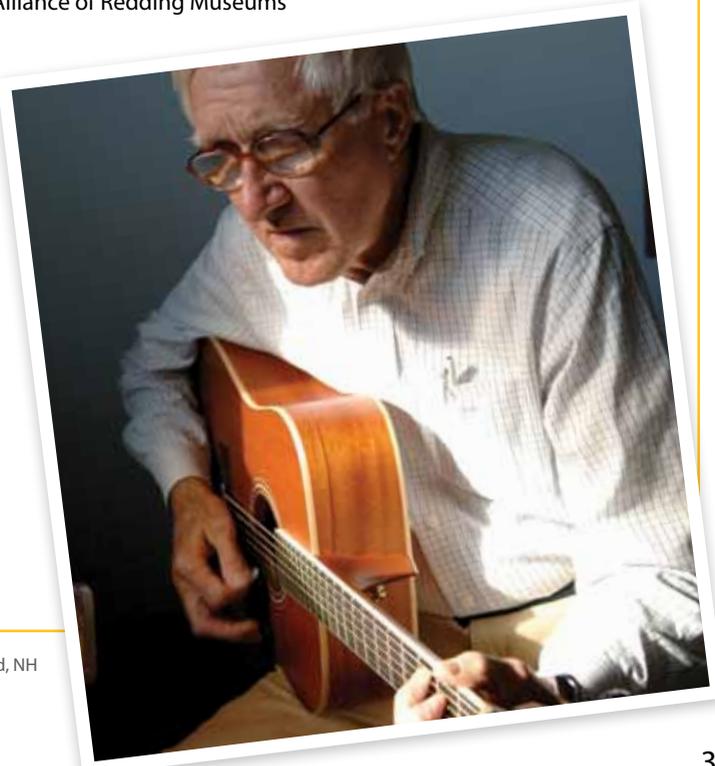
### Turtle Bay Exploration Park Redding, California

In the mid-1990s, the Redding Museum of Art and History in Redding, California bore many similarities to other small museums in the United States. It was a free-standing nonprofit organization with 19 board members, 7 full-time and 6 part-time staff members, a small collection, an exhibition program and several offerings in arts education. It occupied a city-owned facility and received city financial support, as well as funding from a local foundation and from its members and donors.

But trouble signs were brewing for the museum. The city was threatening to cut its support and reclaim the building. Many in town (including officers of the largest local foundation) were pushing an exciting new concept – a consortium home for a number of nonprofit cultural organizations on a beautiful slice of land on the Sacramento River – and they wanted to see the museum participate. The project was seen as a possible economic development opportunity for the city, a way to enhance administrative efficiency, draw tourists and become part of a larger environmentally-friendly development of the river front. Funders from outside the area were also interested in the idea of an institution with an interdisciplinary focus.

A number of people and organizations began discussions about the future, with three nonprofit entities actually entering into a serious merger dialogue – the museum, the Shasta Natural Science Association (which included a natural science facility and arboretum) and the Forest Museum. The Alliance of Redding Museums was formed to facilitate a merger. Initially, many participants had grave concerns about the merger idea. The Redding Museum of Art and History in particular felt its collections and programs would be marginalized, board members and volunteers would be disenfranchised, and staff would lose their jobs. Yet a study had confirmed that Redding could no longer sustain a multi-organizational model and the opportunities of the merged structure were very enticing.

Despite misgivings, a merger was consummated on March 31, 1997. It turned out that some of the original concerns had been well founded. Despite efforts to find positions for as many staff and board members and volunteers as possible, some ended up moving on. To maintain the integrity of the merging entities, advisory councils were formed from the original boards and volunteers (and are still active today). And by that time, the Alliance of Redding Museums had become Turtle Bay Exploration Park ([www.turtlebay.org](http://www.turtlebay.org)), an organization with a much broader mission and profile serving more than 14,000 students and nearly 150,000 visitors annually. Students came not only from California, but Nevada and Oregon to learn about the Sacramento River region, science, art, history, forestry and horticulture. They and the thousands of other visitors to the Park also came to see the magnificent Sundial Bridge, designed by world-famous architect Santiago Calatrava, that anchors the beautiful campus – the first such bridge commissioned from this iconic artist in the United States.



Concord Community Music School, Concord, NH

The Turtle Bay merger story is typical of many that come from the annals of the nonprofit world and end up being successful.

- It was brought about by a mixture of opportunities and threats.
- The motivating vision – particularly as it related to community aspirations – was much greater than those of any of the individual organizations that entered the discussions.
- The merger was initially resisted (or was regarded skeptically) by many of those whose lives would be most seriously affected, including nearly 100 board members of the affected institutions, their hundreds of volunteers and 50 staff members.
- The merger was facilitated by the proverbial carrot and stick. Funders who were prepared to underwrite the merger (the carrot) were not willing to support business as usual (the stick).
- The merger required significant outside objective expertise and assistance to consummate. Consultants were brought in from outside the community with no previous connection to any of the parties.
- The outcome initially led to many unanticipated challenges that almost derailed the project, including overly optimistic revenue projections and under-estimated expenses.
- Five years after the merger was consummated, a majority of those who had been involved initially – trustees, staff and volunteers of the original entities – were no longer part of the merged organization.

Perhaps most important, in the end, the resulting totality of Turtle Bay was in almost all respects – quality and size of facility and organization, number and quality of programs, number of visitors, size of budget and number of donors – vastly more than the sum of its parts.

## What Is an Organizational Merger?

While a partnership is a nuanced concept with many variants, as we saw in the previous chapter, an organizational merger in the nonprofit arena is a very simple idea.

Organizational mergers often result in what appears to be a completely new entity, frequently with a different name and identity. This is true even though, in most cases, the underlying corporate structure remains that of one of the original merging organizations. From a practical point of view, keeping an existing corporate structure allows for continuity in tax exempt status, fund raising, operations and programming and avoids the need to undergo the effort, expense and time of incorporation once again. That said, the bylaws and often the articles of incorporation of the old corporation generally need to be redrafted and refiled.

A nonprofit organizational merger is the combining of two or more entities into a single legally constituted nonprofit organization.

## Expanding the Mission

One important benefit of mergers is they help organizations expand their missions in important ways.



MacPhail Center for Music, Minneapolis, MN

Chapter 1 talked about the fact that organizations in the 21st century need to think about reframing or expanding their missions so that they address broad community aspirations and challenges. This is often easier said than done. Were it simply a question of redrafting a mission statement, any organization could do so. While this is certainly an important option to explore, it rarely is enough. Often a significant reconceptualization and redesign of programs and activities is required along with concomitant re-engineering of the infrastructure that supports those activities. Sometimes new staff has to be hired and new facilities found. For many organizations acting alone, this is more than they can pull off. But mergers have allowed such organizations to find the synergy, talent and programs to undergo the appropriate transformation.

Think of the six organizations in Redding, California. None of them was addressing community goals to the extent that the city was prepared to continue funding them. None was in a position to become a significant economic engine for the city. None could attract tourists. Alone, their missions were regarded as relatively narrow. There is nothing wrong with focusing on local art and history or forestry or gardens so long as there are enough supporters to sustain the organizations that champion them. But this was becoming a problem. The support base was eroding and long-term viability was uncertain.

Yet, when the six organizations merged, their collective vision was exponentially expanded. A new mission statement encompassed a much broader horizon. It was more than simply adding the six existing mission statements together and educating visitors of all ages with entertaining and stimulating exhibitions and programs in each of the respective disciplines. Rather, there was now a commitment to a truly interdisciplinary approach to education that met the needs of local and regional schools: to interpret the complex relationships between people and their environments. Using the unique cultural, historical and natural resources of the Sacramento River Region, Turtle Bay was to serve as a catalyst for exploring universal human experiences.

At the same time, the goals of the institution focused on the economic aspirations of city residents, especially in the area of tourism. Redding was strategically located on the major interstate linking San Francisco to Oregon, but getting people to stop had been a major challenge. Turtle Bay, with its rich exhibitions and programs and its magnificent campus, was to provide the incentive for them to do so, especially since Calatrava's Sundial Bridge would be visible from the interstate. At the same time, funders took notice. No longer were there six organizations with miniscule budgets serving small local audiences. Now there was a single powerhouse with a multi-state impact.

## Other Reasons to Merge?

There are other incentives for two or more entities to merge that the Turtle Bay case illuminates:

### Enhanced program effectiveness and delivery

Increased and higher quality programming could be delivered to more people. The merged entity was able to develop a whole new dimension to its programming, using the Sacramento River and human ecology as unifying themes.

### Cost effectiveness

It is often less expensive to work as one than several. In the case of Turtle Bay, simply eliminating multiple executive director positions – albeit painful – saved a great deal of money.

### Visibility

One larger organization can often command more attention than two or more smaller ones. At Turtle Bay that visibility was multiplied exponentially by the physical campus with the iconic Sundial bridge. The combined budgets for marketing went much further when they were supporting one organization rather than three. In addition, a new brand – Turtle Bay Exploration Park – provided a unifying image.

### Legitimacy

Turtle Bay as a single combined cultural resource was seen as a powerful entity and its presence soon eclipsed anything that any of the original participating organizations had experienced. When the first federal and state grants were received and national corporations lent their support, that prestige grew even faster.

### Survival

Sometimes key funders are unwilling to continue providing dollars to entities with overlapping missions and activities and will strongly encourage a merger. This was the case with the Turtle Bay consortium as the two largest funders – the city and the local foundation – put the organizations on notice that ongoing support would diminish as long as they maintained their independent corporate structures.



Rocky Mountain Center for Musical Arts, Lafayette, CO

## Challenges

Go to the business section of any major national paper and you will read about mergers in the for-profit sector on a regular basis. They are very common. In the nonprofit sector, they are not.

Bringing a merger negotiation to a successful consummation is relatively rare in the nonprofit world, and the great majority of organizations that begin the discussions are unable to go the distance. Why should this be? Why is it so difficult for nonprofits to merge?

The answer revolves around the fundamental difference between for-profit and nonprofit organizations. In the for-profit world, the goal is to make money for the owner or owners (who in large corporations are the shareholders). There is no ambiguity about what constitutes success. When a company sees an opportunity to be more profitable through a merger or when it is not making enough money to suit the owners, a merger opportunity is a reasonable option.

In the nonprofit world, bottom-line issues are not the only driving force and there are no shareholders to push merger talks forward. Making money is nice, but the mission of a nonprofit is about public service and it is not always clear how a merger will enhance the mission. Other troublesome questions can revolve around a number of factors:

### Mission drift

The very forces that can help an organization expand its mission are the same ones that can lead to concerns that the mission is getting too broad and diffuse. *"We are in the arts and history business,"* said one of the trustees of the Redding Museum of Art and History. *"We need to keep our focus and do what we do well. Being all things to all people will mean we don't stand for anything and quality will suffer."*

### Identity

When a nonprofit organization believes it has a strong brand and is regarded positively by its constituents, funders and community, its supporters may feel that a merger could weaken its image, especially if there is to be a name change. On the other hand, a merger may, in the end, lead to an even stronger brand.

### Control

Two boards, two executive directors, two staffs and a series of overlapping programs lead to a big question mark: who will make decisions about how to resolve these duplications? And once that question is resolved, who will make decisions going forward? If I regard my organization's programs or staff or board as better in some way than those of my merger partner(s) – a perception often held by many parties to a merger – how will I be assured that my organization's people don't lose control over decision-making? In fact, in many cases, the feeling that "we are better than they are" is more illusory than real and even when it has some elements of truth, quality control can be built into the merged unit.

### Personnel (both trustees and staff)

One of the most common barriers to a merger is the fact that people will lose their jobs or their board positions. There is generally only room for one CEO, one board chair and the numbers of staff and trustees will probably require a shedding of both professional and governance positions. This is one reason that an ideal time for a merger is when vacancies appear in leadership positions such as an executive director and/or board chair.



Solon Center for the Arts, Solon, OH

### Reduction of favorite programs

It is not unusual for people to be attached to favorite programs that they believe will be at risk if they merge. In the case of the Redding organizations, that fear was well founded. Many programs offered by the participating organizations had been replaced within five years of the merger, though most people would say that the new offerings were far better. Art enthusiasts were correct that their single-minded focus on art had been reduced in the merged entity. The question is always: will the gains be greater than the losses?

### Increased bureaucracy

Mergers do not always lead to greater efficiency or cost savings, especially when the organizations involved have been using low-cost and/or volunteer labor. Increased professionalism will lead to higher wages being paid to more staff and as organizational size grows, new positions will be added to support the more complex infrastructure. Volunteer labor may be pushed out (and offended) in the process and costs can and do rise.

### Concern about funders and funding

Some mergers are opposed by an organization's major donors, who threaten to pull their funding if the merger goes through. In other cases, the attraction of new funding opportunities may diminish support for activities that people hold dear. Clear-eyed assessments need to be made as to whether the long-term gains will offset the immediate-term losses.

### Geography (when the merger is across communities)

A merger that occurs between organizations in more than one community can create concerns about equitable distribution and whether all communities involved will share equally in money, staffing, board representation, facilities and/or programming.

## The special challenges of cross-sector mergers

When mergers occur across sectors as in the case of the Turtle Bay merger, there can be concerns. *“What does someone trained in forest products understand about art?”* asked one of the Redding Museum of Art and History trustees. *“They have no idea what we mean when we talk about the quality of the art we exhibit, and I fear that our standards will become totally compromised.”*

## Irreversibility

Mergers tend to be permanent. They require significant steps that lead to changes in corporate structure, identity, governance, programming and many other aspects of the participating organizations. Unlike most partnerships, which can be undone (though some may be tied up contractually for a while), a merger, once consummated, is difficult to reverse. For this reason, it is easier to raise doubts in people’s minds and convince them that the step is too draconian.

In the end, it is always easier for nonprofit organizations to find excuses not to merge even if the reasons for doing so are compelling. It is important for advocates to be able to paint a compelling picture of the advantages. When this can be augmented by the strong support of funders, it often can be enough to convince a majority of those making the decision to move ahead.

## Acquisitions

In the business world, we often hear the term “mergers and acquisitions” as if the two nouns mean roughly the same thing. But acquisitions are different from mergers.

Mergers occur when two or more firms agree to go forward as a new single company. This is exactly what occurred in the case of Turtle Bay. An acquisition has very different characteristics.

An acquisition occurs when one company or nonprofit organization simply takes over another. The acquiring company keeps its identity and its corporate structure. It retains whatever it wants of the staff, activities, products, intellectual property and other assets of the target company and the target company ceases to exist.

## Bay Chamber Concerts Rockport, Maine

### Lessons in Learning

Bay Chamber Concerts ([www.baychamberconcerts.org](http://www.baychamberconcerts.org)) in Rockport, Maine began as a summer chamber music series in 1960. Founded by teenage music students, the organization grew into one of the largest cultural institutions in the state, with year-round concerts in several towns and some school programs by visiting artists. On the eve of its 30th anniversary, a capital campaign feasibility study revealed that the organization's circle of local supporters, while generous, was very narrow. For most people in town, the organization (with its well-heeled, largely out-of-town audience and donor pool) was not relevant to their lives and not worthy of their support.

The reaction by the board to this news was swift and dramatic. The organization increased its educational outreach offerings in schools, promoted a new summer chamber music camp for Maine youth and expanded the number of cash prizes for talented music students. By the eve of Bay Chamber Concerts' 40th anniversary in 2000, some board members were even pushing the idea of a year-round community music school. But the board as a whole was divided about such a significant additional step for what had been for decades primarily a summer-oriented concert organization.

Meanwhile, one of the board members of Bay Chamber Concerts had on her own created a parallel music education program in the community – a student string orchestra initiative called Odeon that operated during the school year. It became quite popular, garnering the support of the major corporate funder in town and soon requiring consideration of a second ensemble. Success posed something of a dilemma for the volunteers who ran Odeon. Expansion would mean a lot more of their time and effort.

Talks began between Bay Chamber Concerts and Odeon. Would this fully formed, tested, and successful program provide a first step toward a year-round school for the larger organization? The risks were minimal and the potential pay-off high. Bay Chamber Concerts could expand its mission, activities and donor base without having to design something from scratch. Odeon could gain an administrative home. After working out the details, an acquisition was consummated and Odeon ceased to exist except as a program of Bay Chamber Concerts.

In 2010 at the time of its 50th anniversary, Bay Chamber Concerts opened its community music school. Along with private lessons and classes, the Odeon orchestra program was a major feature of its offerings.

Bay Chamber Concerts, Rockport, ME. Photo: Monica Kelly.



The story of Bay Chamber Concerts and Odeon provides insight into why an acquisition can be a win-win for both the acquiring organization and the target entity. For Bay Chamber Concerts, wanting to expand into a new area without a lot of risk, Odeon provided many advantages. It had many potential supporters, an education activity for local and state kids and community relevance. One board member called the acquisition a “no-brainer” – a low-risk, easy path to a desired outcome. Bay Chamber Concerts would not have to design a program, sell it to the community, find donors or hire people to run it since Odeon volunteers and Bay Chamber’s existing staff could manage it. All of the hard work had been done and the results proven.

For Odeon’s founder, while success had been a heady experience, it eventually posed challenges for which its overworked volunteers had not prepared. No one wanted to go through the considerable effort of building a large organizational infrastructure – yet how else could Odeon grow? Bay Chamber Concerts offered what was required – a trained staff, computerized systems for marketing and fund raising, a profile with wealthy donors and a blue chip image as a high-quality music organization. As the program grew and as the Odeon concept evolved into a broad aspiration for a community music school, the founder of Odeon left the board of Bay Chamber Concerts and became its Education Director, with Odeon a significant part of her portfolio.

## Subsidiaries

Another kind of merger occurs when two organizations come together and one becomes a subsidiary of the other.

Unlike an acquisition, where one of the entities disappears, both entities retain their identity and both can operate with a fair degree of autonomy. Yet, one organization owns and controls the other, legally speaking.

Young Audiences New York, New York, NY



## Artistas y Músicos Latino Americanos Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### Lessons in Learning

Artistas y Músicos Latino Americanos ([www.amla.org](http://www.amla.org)) is the result of a coming together in 2006 of two entities that shared a focus on the Hispanic community. The first was La Asociación de Músicos Latino Americanos (La Asociación or AMLA). The second was Esperanza.

La Asociación, founded in 1982 in Philadelphia, was created to represent and advocate for Latin musicians and music. Its mission was to promote the development, dissemination and understanding of Latin music in the Philadelphia area and beyond. It first offered music classes in 1984 and a music school was formally founded in 1986.

Esperanza, founded in Philadelphia in 1987, became the premiere faith-based Hispanic network in the country. It eventually developed relationships with more than 12,000 clergy, churches and community leaders across the country, with a mission to strengthen Hispanic communities. With a staff of more than 200, it could offer infrastructure, operational, financial, program development, management and capacity-building expertise.

In 2006, the founder of the Association approached the president of Esperanza to forge a new kind of organizational relationship that resulted in the creation of a new entity. It drew upon the mission, vision and history of AMLA and the organizational expertise and power of Esperanza.

The new entity became a subsidiary corporation of Esperanza with its own distinct board, leadership and day-to-day control of operations. It received both financial and in-kind support from Esperanza in a relationship that demonstrated the power of working together within a challenging economy to preserve and nurture services that address critical needs for Philadelphia's residents and communities.

A subsidiary arrangement is often found in cases where one organization is much larger than another and can offer considerable infrastructure, prestige and clout. At the same time, the larger organization may well be looking for the capacity to expand programmatically and reach new constituencies without having to start from scratch or compete with an existing organization.

The dangers here are obvious. Unless a subsidiary is careful to retain its own autonomy, governance and access to funding, its dependence can spell doom if the host organization ever changes its plans and loses interest in maintaining the relationship. Having given up its ability to operate autonomously, the subsidiary may find it difficult to reconstitute itself should that become necessary. In the worst of cases, the host may not wish to continue the program but may not even permit the subsidiary to split off once again. Obviously, great care needs to be taken before entering into such a dependent relationship, though it can be very beneficial.



Metro Parks and Recreation, Cultural Arts Division,  
Nashville, TN

## Timing

Is there such a thing as a right time to merge? Absolutely. With mergers, timing is sometimes everything.

### Lessons in Learning

#### Woodruff Arts Center City of Atlanta

In 1962, the City of Atlanta suffered an unprecedented loss when an airplane carrying the leaders of the city's arts and civic community crashed at the end of a runway attempting takeoff at Orly Airport. As the city grieved, it came together and used the devastating loss as a catalyst to build a fitting memorial to the victims. A Memorial Arts Center – now the Woodruff Arts Center ([www.woodruffcenter.org](http://www.woodruffcenter.org)) – opened in 1968 originally to house the Atlanta College of Art, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the High Museum of Art. In 1970 the Alliance Theatre joined the center as did Young Audiences in 2005.

Atlanta's new arts center would have been simply one of a number of such complexes around the country but for one important detail. The original three entities merged into a single corporation and, when the other two joined, they also merged into the corporate umbrella. This allowed for synergy of various kinds to take place in management, programming, marketing and fund raising. In the area of arts education, in particular, more than a million children annually would end up participating in Woodruff programs, the largest base of any arts center in the country. And for Young Audiences ([www.yawac.org](http://www.yawac.org)), the newest Woodruff partner, being part of the consortium led to greater visibility, enhanced prestige, community importance and a stronger outlook for long-term sustainability.

We have alluded to the fact that mergers in the nonprofit arena are difficult to pull off. The idea that an internationally acclaimed symphony orchestra, art museum and theater would undertake a corporate merger (and two other entities would join later) was simply unprecedented and has not been replicated on that scale since. Certainly civic pride, generosity, vision and many other factors played into the decision. But these exist in other places. Atlanta had something else going for it – timing. It is very unlikely that the merger could have happened ten years prior or ten years later. A huge civic tragedy brought everyone together and, for that remarkable moment, almost anything was possible.

The Woodruff story is unique. Nevertheless, it offers an important lesson. There will be better and worse times to pursue a merger. A long-time executive director may resign. A strong board president may be on the way out. A major funder may propose that a merger be considered and be willing to provide the funds for consulting assistance to get it accomplished and operating money for the initial years. All these offer opportunities to jumpstart a merger. Such talks will be challenging and it is always best to start with the wind at your back.

## Key Questions

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1. Might your organization benefit from a merger? Are there candidate organizations that would be willing to enter a dialogue? Are there funders who would be willing to support exploration of a merger?
  2. Are there organizations that would be logical acquisition targets? What would be the advantages and what would they bring in terms of human, financial or programmatic assets? Is your organization a potential candidate for an acquisition? What are the pros and cons for an acquirer?
  3. What examples have you seen of successful mergers or acquisitions? What led to their success?
  4. Can you point to examples that have not been successful? What are the lessons from these?
  5. Is this a time (or is there one in the future) that might be propitious for merger talks? Is there an upcoming leadership change on the board or staff, a change in program priorities or an anticipated loss in funding that might focus people's attention?
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Big Thought, Dallas, TX

# Chapter 4

## Building Collaborative Systems



Metro Parks and Recreation, Cultural Arts Division, Nashville, TN

## What is a System?

Dictionary definitions for the word “system” fall into two categories:

- A system is a set of interacting, interrelated or **interdependent parts or entities** forming an integrated or complex whole.
- A system is also set of detailed **methods, procedures, programs and routines** established to carry out a specific activity, perform a duty or solve a problem.

Both of these ideas contribute to our definition of a “collaborative system” in arts education and creative learning.

A collaborative system is composed of one or more public institutions (like a municipal government or public school system) working in an interdependent structure with multiple nonprofit organizations towards a set of common civic goals through jointly designed programs and shared measures of performance.

## How is a system different from a large partnership involving several entities?

A system is so large and complex and involves so many entities that it requires different approaches to governance, management, goal-setting and accountability.



The Village of Arts and Humanities, Philadelphia, PA

## Lessons in Learning

### Big Thought, the City of Dallas & Dallas Independent School District

In 1997, the Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs approached a group of local organizations whose primary focus was on children and asked them to determine how many students had access to the arts as a method for improving their learning experience.

A community leadership group, including Big Thought, was formed to conduct a comprehensive assessment. The leadership group gathered existing data from multiple sources across the community that showed existing arts interaction opportunities for children. The aggregated data was plotted out and showed a troubling trend. Certain students experienced little to no access to cultural resources, while some were offered a wide variety of arts education – sometimes being duplicated by multiple organizations.

This watershed moment prompted Big Thought, the City of Dallas and the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) to explore ways to equalize arts experiences across the city. The answer, as ambitious as it was obvious, was that the environment – not just the programs – had to change.

Big Thought organized conversations with city and school leadership, funders, parents, teachers, community members and children themselves to determine the importance of arts in the classroom and in the lives of Dallasites. They also brought together 65 arts and cultural organizations to consider the issues as vested partners in the education of children. Together, people agreed that the arts are a critical component in the educational and social development of students and that equity of opportunity was a community value that everyone needed to pursue collectively. This consensus served as a mandate not only to Big Thought but to the city as a whole – the arts for all children deserved to have a place among core subjects and activities that can, collectively, help children succeed.

Since that time, Dallas has incorporated the arts into the fabric of its public school system, neighborhoods and communities, both in and out of school, through the Thriving Minds initiative. Thriving Minds serves more than 100,000 students alongside 100 cultural institutions and other community partners each year through equitable creative learning. It is deeply embedded in the local school district and city and despite multiple leadership changes, the system has flourished for fifteen years following the original 1997 study.



Big Thought, Dallas, TX

For many years, the story of how Dallas managed to develop a way of incorporating the arts into classrooms and neighborhoods so thoroughly with so many agencies and organizations was considered unusual. Inserting arts education into the fabric of a city's values and public education's instructional delivery systems was something that many said was simply not replicable given the challenges of 21st century American education. The consensus was, and is, that initiatives of this magnitude are only possible



*Performing Arts Workshop, San Francisco, CA*

when they are supported by top public and private sector leadership. It is true that a large percentage of these individuals often do not embrace arts education as a priority. Because Big Thought's 15-year journey also could only have occurred with the involvement of the city's civic institutions – the City of Dallas, the Dallas Independent School District, major cultural, educational, youth development, health/wellness and juvenile justice organizations – it did not seem replicable to many observers.

Yet other cities such as Amarillo and Austin (Texas), Boston, Charleston, Chicago, Hartford, Los Angeles, Portland (Oregon) and St. Louis have built collaborative systems like the one in Dallas and new ones are embarking on the journey. The driving force in every case has been a community vision that goes well beyond the arts to include academic performance, the development of life skills, health and well-being, equity, public safety, youth leadership, 21st century workforce development and more. We discuss how these powerful ideas are developed and articulated in chapter 5. Without these aspirations to bind and incentivize disparate interests, large groups of busy people with many other agendas and demands would never hold together over time.

### The place of arts education in a collaborative system

In the Dallas system described at the beginning of this chapter, a concern about access to the arts was the reason for the original study commissioned by the city. But through the process it became apparent that the people of Dallas understood the arts to be part of a solution to a larger challenge of overall student development. Some people liked the arts for their potential to promote academic achievement; others believed they were desirable for their social effects. Still others saw the arts as a vehicle for young people to become more whole human beings. While the arts were valued for different reasons, the system worked because the focus was on a larger goal. Other large-scale systems are mirroring this assumption and use the arts in varying degrees of prominence.

## Lessons in Learning

## The TAKE ACTION Leadership Campaign

In 2008, under the direction of Beyond the Bell (BTB) Branch - Los Angeles Unified School District, three Los Angeles-based agencies (Champions-now Arc, EduCare Foundation and !Mpac People) piloted a youth leadership program in eight area high schools. The program focused on out-of-school activities for young people. It was a success and quickly grew into The TAKE ACTION Leadership Campaign [TAC ([www.takeactionleadershipcampaign.org](http://www.takeactionleadershipcampaign.org))], a comprehensive system of organizations and agencies that partner with Beyond the Bell-LAUSD and include after-school providers and community organizations within Southern California. They united around a common vision: *give students leadership skills, serve local communities, empower students to mentor their peers, celebrate the arts...and young people's leadership skills will flourish*. Leadership has been taught through service learning projects, outdoor education leadership retreats, arts celebrations and a peer mentoring model to assist students in bridging transitions. Since 2008, TAC has grown through Beyond the Bell-LAUSD to involve more than 30,000 students annually at 33 high schools and 6 middle schools. In November 2010, the collaborative partners (Beyond the Bell-LAUSD, Arc, EduCare Foundation and !Mpac People) were honored by the California Afterschool Network with the award for "Innovation in High School After School Collaboration and Partnerships."

TAC is not merely an arts education program or system. It is a unified high school after-school programming model for youth development in which the arts play an important role. Funded with federal 21st Century Learning Center grants and supplemented by other public and private funding, TAC is overseen by the original managing partner agencies. These agencies contract with a variety of collaborating providers and participating high schools, most of which are not arts organizations. The program's primary goals relate clearly to the needs of at-risk youth in the Los Angeles area and only briefly mention the arts:

- Reduce youth violence and promote student understanding of diversity issues at their schools
- Reduce high school dropout rates by targeting 9th grade students at their schools
- Implement after-school activities that will improve student achievement by meeting the cultural, linguistic, and academic needs of all students
- Provide resources and opportunities for all high school students that are college-bound
- Facilitate service learning, volunteerism and arts events
- Foster workforce readiness

The TAKE ACTION Leadership Campaign uses a variety of strategies to accomplish its goals, the arts being one of many. Should that reduce the incentive for arts supporters to join in and support it? Not at all. Its arts activities are substantial and important to the total program. Some arts organizations might chafe at joining a system in which the arts are not central. Their mission-related focus on the arts might seem compromised if it recedes to the level of supporting player. While every organization must decide its comfort level with systems of this kind, it is important to assess whether the arts activities can retain their integrity and a high profile (as they do in TAC), even when the chief aspirations of the program may have a different focus.

## Common Elements of Collaborative Systems

What are some common elements of a collaborative system?

### Involvement of public civic institutions

School district involvement is a common element in any large-scale system involving education. City and/or county governments are generally also engaged in a variety of ways. Their direct involvement (through the participation of elected officials or city/county administrative staff) can be supplemented through the participation of various city or county departments that they oversee: parks and recreation, libraries, homeless services, public safety and others.

### Cross-sector participation

In addition to arts organizations, systems include entities outside the arts. Often cultural organizations that provide arts education services will find themselves sitting around a table with educational providers in science, social studies or mathematics. Participants will also include agency personnel from social services, juvenile justice, health and housing.

### Public and private financial support

Healthy systems have a variety of revenue streams, but the most effective of them generally have support both from public sources and private ones. Initially, public/private philanthropy usually begins at a local level to seed a growing system that is finding its footing. As the system becomes more mature and effective, its demonstrable success can then be used to woo national funders looking for initiatives with a proven track record.

Big Thought, Dallas, TX





Progressive Arts Alliance, Cleveland, OH

## Delivery on an ambitious community agenda

Inevitably, systems will encompass broad community goals. But in many respects, that makes them no different than other kinds of partnerships. What distinguishes a system is its obligation to deliver results. Partnerships can say they are working toward equity in education, but a system will be held accountable for fulfilling that aspiration in a measurable way by a specific time. In Dallas, one way that the system promised and delivered on the goal of equity was by placing art and music teachers in every elementary school, offering arts integration funding and training to every classroom elementary teacher and ensuring that every elementary school child received 45 minutes of arts instruction every week.

## Meaningful evaluation

Because of the high levels of accountability required by a system – there are after all, many entities involved and generally large amounts of funding – evaluation (often outside evaluation that appears completely objective) is a requirement. Good evaluation is of two kinds: formative and summative. In the case of formative evaluation, the goal is to provide ongoing advice on how to make the program more effective. Summative evaluation is more like a report card, providing an assessment of whether the goals and targets were achieved. (For more on evaluation, see chapter 6).

## A clear advocacy agenda

Systems are change agents in their communities and change requires a constant flow of information to elected officials, corporate leadership, faith-based leaders and others in the community who can influence people and make important decisions that will lead to success. Those individuals listen to ordinary citizens, so systems need strategies to convince them of the importance of their ideas. Finally, systems also require ongoing sources of financial and legislative support. Effective systems have developed a list of issues for which they will advocate and strategies for reaching different people with their message.

## One or more managing partners

Because a system is complex, there has to be a group of people who take responsibility for managing it. Often, a single agency or organization takes this responsibility – either an existing one (as in the case of Big Thought in Dallas) or one created anew. There are also examples of shared management (as is the case with the TAKE ACTION Leadership Campaign in Los Angeles, where there are three managing partners). In every case, though, there must be a single entity that bears legal and fiduciary responsibility and is accountable to funders and to the community at large.

## Staff and committee structure

The system must have a dedicated staff to carry out administrative tasks and often a dedicated program staff that works exclusively for the projects the managing partner oversees. There are also generally committees for oversight of programs, professional development, evaluation, fund raising, communications, advocacy and other areas as needed.

## Broadly shared governance

Since systems evolve from large groups with disparate interests and agendas, it is important that governance reflect a range of points of view. This is the only way to hold a coalition together for a long period of time. People have to feel that their ideas can find a voice within the system. From a practical point of view, however, governance has to be efficient. Generally some kind of executive board made up of a consortium of major players meets more regularly and is empowered to make certain decisions. It must be emphasized, however, that from a strictly legal and fiduciary point of view, an existing 501(c)(3) organization must be in control and its board be held accountable. The managing partner organization's board will play this role and will have legal and financial authority.

## Why a Collaborative System?

Building a collaborative system takes a tremendous amount of time and work. Maintaining it takes even more. Why bother?

### Scale

As much as we may be attracted by the idea of thousands of small acts of kindness and random acts of improvement, large-scale aspirations like access and equity cannot be achieved without collective and organized action. For decades, the benefits of arts learning have been muted by inequity and inconsistency. Students and families with the means or disposition could pursue the arts over a substantial length of time while low-income ones were unable for the most part to reap the many rewards of sustained exposure to the arts. Only a broad-based system can realistically address the issue effectively.

### Impact

Related to the idea of scale is impact. A system allows for the building of a cohesive array of services and opportunities that will have a more lasting impact than a narrow band of offerings would. Addressing gaps in service takes the active participation of a variety of partners and investors, all working toward the same goals. Instead of groups with competing agendas addressing single issues, partners unify around a set of outcomes and strategies to accomplish joint goals.

### Building on existing community assets

An effective broad-based system can draw upon extraordinary talents and resources. There are many organizations and agencies that can deliver a full range of instructional and professional development services. In addition, some may offer management and support that yield expertise and cost savings. For example, in Dallas, a city agency was able to provide computer mapping expertise that allowed Big Thought to identify gaps in service and map these against city council districts, school sites and various organizational resources in the city's mapping database.

### Increased capacity

Having a wide array of community assets on which to draw increases a system's capacity to carry out its programmatic goals with strong infrastructure support. In addition, the expanded infrastructure that comes with a system – staff, equipment, expertise and access – also increases capacity. Technology, curriculum, professional development, fund raising, advocacy and delivery are all enhanced.

### Visibility/advocacy

It goes without saying that a dozen organizations will command more attention than one. A hundred will command more attention still. This can translate into media coverage, advocacy impact and a place at the table when major civic issues are discussed.

### Sustainability

This may seem counter-intuitive since systems take so much more money to maintain, but the larger and stronger the system, the greater the likelihood that it will be sustainable. A system has access to many more sources of funding (including ongoing funding) and it has the depth of infrastructure to survive changes in policy or people. Indeed, a system can generally survive the departure of key individual leaders such as a school superintendent.

## Who Should Be Involved in a Collaborative System?

In designing a system, the convener should initially invite a great many people and organizations to the discussions – indeed, no one with an interest in the topic should be excluded.

Casting a wide net can pique the interest of important potential partners who represent various agendas, affiliations and interests. Attendant upon this diversity are opportunities – a variety of viewpoints that can help create a reliable snapshot of the community's concerns, desires and challenges. Discussions are not always easy or straight-forward – diametrically opposed agendas can and often do cause friction. But this often strengthens the final outcome.

As the agenda becomes more focused, some people will inevitably start to lose interest and others will depart for any number of reasons. It is natural and unavoidable that some potential partners will distance themselves from participation. Far from being a failure, this process ensures that the priorities of everyone remaining are aligned and that the stability of the system isn't compromised by unwilling or unable partners. It is the responsibility of the coordinating agency to decide when to "bless and release" certain organizations and individuals – letting them go without friction and with thanks – maintaining a positive relationship with each and accepting that their role will continue independent from the system.

This approach is important since many of those who depart may wish to return and others can be helpful later on by lending their endorsement and support. Ultimately the system will be comprised of:

### 1. Influencers

These individuals are critical to whether or not the program happens. They are the deciders in many areas – gaining access to students, securing adequate funding and ensuring that it is properly allocated, and addressing policies that may need to be strengthened or changed. They include city council members, mayors, school board representatives, superintendents, funders, elected officials and trustees. Not only will they make important decisions, but they can mobilize the next category of participants – the implementers.

### 2. Implementers

These individuals are generally in important direct supervisory positions over those who will actually be delivering the programs and professional development. They include school principals, deans of instruction and directors of cultural institutions and other partner organizations. They will take their signals to some extent from the influencers and will be able to ensure that the work is carried out by those who report to them.

### 3. Programmers/Service Providers

Programmers are the people who actually provide the activity. They can include teachers, artists, librarians, recreation staff and even staff in a juvenile detention facility. Without their energy and expertise, the program simply doesn't happen effectively.

### 4. Beneficiaries

These individuals are those who directly benefit from the program: students, families, community audiences, incarcerated young people and/or hospital patients. They should not be forgotten as they constitute important voices in forming the partnership, speaking on its behalf and providing guidance on how it can best meet their needs.



Big Thought, Dallas, TX

## Challenges

Creating and sustaining any type of partnership can be difficult. Yet with large-scale systems, the complications and problems likely will arise consistently.

Some of these grow out of the sheer size and scope of the collaboration; others are a consequence of the changes that will inevitably affect the collaboration over time:

### Control

The larger the system, the less control can be exercised over all the aspects of program development, implementation and support. As the system adds more influencers and implementers, the coordinating agency will relinquish a certain amount of authority. This risk is generally outweighed by the potential pay-off of reaching a far greater number of constituents with wider, more consistent offerings. In terms of program delivery, controlling consistency and quality also becomes more challenging. Though systems are built upon shared ideologies and goals, the day-to-day delivery of the work might look very different from neighborhood to neighborhood, from school to school or from implementer to implementer.

### A right way

The illusion that there is a right way, a correct model of delivery, is soon dashed when one enters a system or even manages it. An agency accustomed to direct delivery or smaller-scale partnerships usually has to overcome the black-and-white belief that there is a correct method for delivery (how we do it) and an incorrect one (how everyone else does it). This way of thinking isn't harmful only to the cohesion of the system, it disregards new and possibly superior methods for arts programming that exist among partners with expertise in different genres, neighborhoods or constituencies.

### My program

The managing partner may well believe that *"it is my organization's program with partners to disseminate it."* But this also turns out to be an illusion. Programs must be developed jointly. The most effective systems utilize the strengths of all partners to identify best practices that are developed and shared. This shared ownership builds communication and trust within the system and fosters goodwill, leading to a system that is capable of self-policing to ensure quality.

### Partner pushback

Inevitably managing partners will be criticized. Pushback from participants in the system can take many forms:

- **"Your organization doesn't listen."**  
It is common for designers of a system to ask communities, school personnel and constituents what they want and need. But all too often, when the program or service is delivered, they are told they did not deliver what was wanted. Sometimes this is because expectations were unrealistic. But in other cases it is because it was easier to fall back on old models than to design what people actually need.



Abrons Arts Center, Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY

- **“Your organization doesn’t represent me.”**  
Especially in large, urban settings, a variety of races, ethnicities and religions are represented and more often than not, nonprofit leadership and staff are demographically incongruous to one or all of their audiences. Ensuring that diversity is represented at all levels of the system is critical.
- **“Your organization isn’t the boss of me.”**  
Convening agencies often struggle to toe a fine and very thin line between being effective at coordination and business strategy on the one hand and being authoritarian and self-promoting on the other. From small things like partner logos on promotional materials to the way funds are dispersed to partners, being the central player in a partnership often means being the bullseye in target practice.
- **“Your organization’s gone corporate.”**  
Especially in the arts, there is often an unspoken commitment to maintaining a certain level of free-spirited, grassroots independence. Occasionally, as successful managing partners become more intertwined with large corporations and government agencies, the arts community can feel that it has sold its soul and lost its identity or purpose.

### Shift in community leadership

Seasoned participants in systems often echo the importance of adaptability in responding to changing community leadership. In the case of legislators in particular, much effort goes into convincing local and state leaders of the importance of the work. When terms expire and new people come in, the process begins anew. They may hold very different values than their predecessors and know little or nothing about the activity. Anticipating these perennial disruptions, keeping tabs on elections and realizing that advocacy is never-ending helps partners maintain a level of sanity in the midst of constant change. With other partners, the tenure of the average nonprofit executive lasts about five years (and with school superintendents it is considerably less). Nothing can be assumed when successors take over.

### Changing funding narrative

Systems change the way organizations need to talk to funders about the work they do. Making the case becomes far more than describing a program, how it will be delivered, and the number of people that will benefit. A collaborative system needs to articulate the importance of collective impact and must present clear evidence of how a coalition will be maintained. It has to provide convincing arguments about how it will address large community aspirations like equity in a large public education system, what achievable targets will measure success, and how it will be evaluated.

### Changing capacities

As systems mature, managing partners will experience the excitement of growing budgets and the stress of increased workloads. Most also will come to realize that the solution to the increasing workloads is not simply adding more responsibilities to existing staff and hiring more people. Organization charts, job descriptions and ways of doing business have to change. People with new skills have to be found. Some existing staff members may need to be retrained or leave. All of this will cost money and it is important not to make bad decisions based on the worry that constituents will be cheated if there is investment in non-programmatic supports. Indeed, large partnerships without appropriate supports will deprive constituents in the end.

## A Final Word on Systems

Systems offer big wins for communities. They can capture the hearts and minds of civic leadership and encourage buy-in by ordinary citizens across a wide spectrum. They can lead to community ownership of arts education and a community-driven approach to program development.

Systems can provide the right leadership and energy that is often required to overcome seemingly immovable obstacles, entrenched regulations, compliance requirements and procedures. They can contribute to the wider availability of arts education in communities and to its sustenance in good times and bad.

In the end, systems can be so powerful that the coalitions that are built can be deployed for any number of community aspirations. This may turn out to be one of their greatest strengths.

Baltimore Clayworks, Baltimore, MD



## Key Questions

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1. Do you feel the time is right to begin discussions about a large-scale system that would include arts education/creative learning as a strategy to address issues and opportunities in your community?
  2. Who are the right people/agencies/organizations to launch the conversation in order to ensure a greater likelihood of success?
  3. What seem to be the major community issues that might galvanize community leadership and that arts education/creative learning might help address?
  4. What are the chances of securing the interest and support of your local school district and your local government(s)? Are there influential people there who could serve as champions?
  5. Who are the community leaders and key partners who should be involved for the idea of a system to catch hold? What are the major institutions?
  6. What are the major obstacles you will have to overcome to get things started?
  7. What are some potential sources of funding?
  8. Once initiated, how can the system ensure a constant process of deliberation, reflection and conversation to ensure continued relevancy and connection among the partners?
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# Chapter 5

## Getting Started and Being Successful



University of Connecticut Community School of the Arts, Storrs, CT

Earlier chapters have described the “what” and the “why” of partnerships, mergers and systems. This chapter focuses on the “how” – especially how to get them started successfully. While many of the suggestions that follow will apply to many kinds of organizations and programs, whether or not they are collaborative in nature, they are especially important to partnerships, mergers and systems.

## Identifying Community Needs and Understanding Trends

Step one in getting started generally involves collecting information on community needs and trends.

### Vision2000 Chattanooga, Tennessee

### Lessons in Learning

Fifteen years after newsman Walter Cronkite referred to Chattanooga as “the dirtiest city in America,” a handful of Chattanooga’s leaders formed Chattanooga Venture and launched Vision2000, which set 40 goals for the city. These goals covered everything from strengthening the downtown area, to solving existing air, water and toxic waste problems, to creating before- and after-school programs. Many of the original goals were realized in the ensuing years with community investment of more than \$800 million and 200 projects and programs.

Based on the success of Vision2000, a diverse group of concerned citizens came together in 2008 and launched Stand ([www.chattanoogastand.com](http://www.chattanoogastand.com)), an attempt to find out from local citizens what should be next for their community. Stand launched a survey that asked residents four open-ended questions about what they wanted for the future of the Chattanooga region.

Over the course of the next five months, Stand staff and volunteers canvassed shopping centers and attended events of all kinds, including house parties, neighborhood gatherings, festivals and rock shows. In September when Stand closed the survey, a total of 26,263 residents had responded, an astonishingly large number that represents over 5 percent of the Chattanooga Metro statistical area and 15 percent of city residents.

Two years later, when the community launched an arts and cultural plan for the region, the community used Stand data in part to come up with a series of recommendations. One of these was to create a high quality system for arts learning based on citizen aspirations in the areas of quality education and economic development.

### Community needs surveys

The Stand study in Chattanooga is a model for how a community can empower its residents to create a vision for the future. Building on Chattanooga’s reputation for a high level of citizen participation in civic affairs, Stand was an example of what local people proudly refer to as “the Chattanooga Way,” a process through which local people get to express their ideas and organize around common purposes. The evidence of the community’s success was obvious with Stand. No medium or large city in this country can boast a participation rate of 15 percent in a survey of its residents.

Yet lots of communities do make efforts to find out what their residents think, and often the results inform visioning and goal-setting in a number of areas including arts and culture. Few public surveys of community needs will see the arts or arts education topping the list – in some cases they are not even on the list. But that is not really the point. Surveys and other forms of needs assessment at the community level identify priorities, which, if properly and meaningfully linked to arts and creative learning, can lead to local interest and support.

### Arts education surveys

Some surveys are explicitly about arts education, as was the case in Dallas (as described at the beginning of the previous chapter) and in Boston more recently.

## Lessons in Learning

### Boston Public Schools Arts Expansion Planning Initiative

In the late spring of 2008, Superintendent of Boston Public Schools (BPS) Dr. Carol R. Johnson, in collaboration with a group of local funders, launched the BPS Arts Expansion Planning Initiative. The initiative was designed to help the school district conduct a comprehensive inventory of current arts offerings in schools as a necessary first step to identifying gaps in access as well as resources and expansion strategies to address those gaps. Phases 1 and 2 of the initiative focused on producing baseline data on direct school offerings in the arts and those provided by community partners ([bit.ly/NzjGrK](http://bit.ly/NzjGrK)).

Data was gathered through a survey that went out to all BPS principals in the spring of 2008, receiving a remarkable 93 percent response rate. This was followed by a survey of nonprofit arts providers, with responses from 57 organizations. In addition, data was gathered through a series of interviews and discussion groups with students, teachers, arts specialists, nonprofit program providers and parents.

Phase 3 of the Initiative resulted in recommendations and expansion strategies that served as the framework for a plan that would enable BPS and individual schools to make consistent progress toward the goal of providing robust arts experiences for every Boston student. A new system for arts education delivery was put in place, which after successful pilot work, received considerable local and national funding.

Arts education surveys can be extremely helpful in advocacy, fund raising and program design. Their intent, while very different from something like Chattanooga's Stand survey or others that look at community needs generally, is to provide something equally valuable – an understanding of arts education both in specific geographies and often over time. Having this information, and being able to combine it with a report on community needs, provides the hard data that is so important in making a case for a new initiative.

While arts education surveys are often conducted at the level of individual communities, some are more ambitious and well funded, such as one in New Jersey.

## New Jersey Arts Education Census Project

## Lessons in Learning

In 2005-2006, six New Jersey agencies and nonprofit organizations cooperated on the design and administration of the New Jersey Arts Education Census Project ([www.artsednj.org/census.asp](http://www.artsednj.org/census.asp)). Its purpose was to document arts education in every school in the state through a mandatory survey and to create a 360-degree view of arts education. Findings indicated the numbers of students with access to arts education, the extent to which schools had updated curricula to meet state standards, numbers of arts specialists by discipline, sources of funding for arts education and other relevant information.

In 2011, the state mandated a follow-up survey to measure any changes since 2005-2006. The survey was designed to quantify student enrollment in arts education programs for New Jersey schools, establish spending patterns over time, provide a basis for analyses of growth and decline of enrollment relative to other school programs and combine this information with economic, demographic, census, school report card and growth forecasts. This would provide context regarding factors that impact access to arts education in a community.

Another important decision was made in 2011 about the arts education survey. It was to publish the final results in an interactive website housed at the New Jersey Arts Education Partnership so that the data could be used by any community for planning and benchmarking purposes. The census has also been used as a model by others, including the Maine Alliance for Arts Education, which conducted a similar census in 2009 ([bit.ly/QXVUQy](http://bit.ly/QXVUQy)).

For those who live in Chattanooga or Boston or New Jersey and want to begin work on a community collaboration involving arts education, much preliminary work has been done through in-depth survey work. There is credible and reliable data on which they can draw to build a case for their ideas and suggest basic design elements. But what if your community does not have such data and there is little interest in conducting extensive and expensive surveys?



Winchester Community Music School, Winchester, MA

Some organizations do their own needs assessment research, and while efforts can begin with something modest, they still can be effective. For example, some may ask each board member to survey three members of the community with a series of questions related to community needs. Great care should be taken in a case like this to be sure that a broad range of residents weigh in on the questions. While this is certainly not as elegant as the examples cited and it will not have the statistical rigor of the other surveys described earlier, it can stand as evidence that design is based on needs assessment. Better yet, any organization, either acting alone or through a consortium of interested parties, can commission more sophisticated research or carry it out themselves. In doing so, it is important to keep in mind that people generally will be swayed more by numbers and statistics than by vague descriptive prose. So in carrying out a research project, it is useful to get professionals to create a credible survey design, even if, in the end, you use your own staff and volunteers to administer the research. Sometimes faculty or students at a local university can help either on a low-cost or no-cost basis. And with the computer programs that have been created for Internet surveys, it is often possible to analyze data automatically as it is collected and presented in an easily readable format.

## Creating a Powerful Idea

Once the basic research has been done, it is time to conceive a powerful idea that will bring people together.

While some people might want to call this process goal-setting, the concept is the same. A powerful uniting idea (or goal) should be:

- Focused
- Inspirational
- Achievable
- Measurable

Implied or stated in a powerful idea is the challenge that must be addressed where growth or improvement is needed. The action that will address it must be clear and coherent but not so narrow that people cannot unite around it. For example, *“to provide classical music instruction to ninth graders so they can improve their ability to perform”* may be a laudable goal. But it is not a powerful idea. It will not be inspirational enough to attract a broad swath of support the way it is stated. It is too narrowly drawn and the outcome is not sufficiently compelling. On the other hand, an idea that is very broad and diffuse can bring a different set of issues. *“To solve the fundamental challenges of student achievement through arts education”* is a difficult concept to pin down, challenging to measure in a compelling way and probably not achievable in the lifecycle of a specific program.

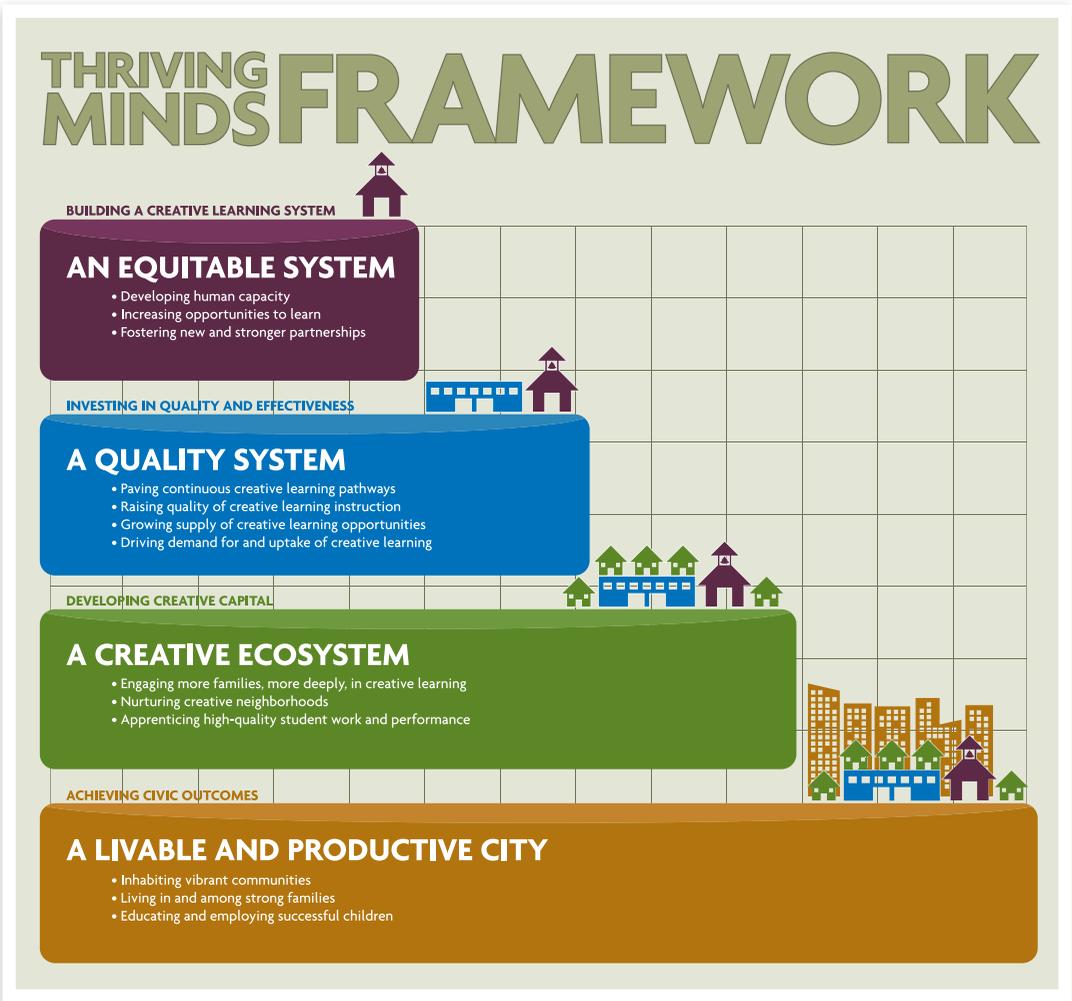
Let’s look at some powerful ideas from collaborative school-based arts education work:

- To provide all elementary school students with access to high quality community arts and cultural resources in support of academic achievement as measured by standardized assessments
- To prepare young people for life’s challenges and opportunities through an arts education program that fosters listening skills, learning skills, creativity and responsibility
- To offer a model curriculum for students that strengthens problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, adding to overall academic achievement and providing a foundation for them to enter the workforce successfully

Each of these in one way or another meets our criteria for a “powerful idea.” Each is more focused than a mission statement, is clear enough about what constitutes long-term success to motivate and inspire others and suggests ways in which results can be evaluated and reported.

Do these statements reflect aspirations that are achievable? A powerful idea has to be clearly divisible into small steps (milestones) that are achievable in getting to the long-term goal. For example, an initiative may use the arts to further the aspiration that a higher percentage of students will graduate from high school. But that result will not occur right away. There must be a logical model that shows the incremental steps by which the outcome will be achieved.

You can think about these steps as having measurable outcomes expressed in widening levels of time and scope. For example, in a graphic from the Thriving Minds initiative in Dallas, there are broad civic outcomes shown at the bottom that are the ultimate goal of the effort. But there are incremental and measurable steps toward achieving those goals, including building an equitable learning system, improving quality and developing creative capital among families and in neighborhoods.



## Developing Ways to Work Together

Almost anyone can work with people who have similar values, hold identical political views and have the same tastes. But in our personal lives – and especially in our work lives – success is often measured by how well we can work with those who are different from us.

This is especially true of a successful collaboration. It is not the place for prima donnas and difficult personalities. Mutual respect – or at least a willingness to listen and compromise – is a requirement. Three issues are especially important to bear in mind:

### Aligning agendas

Developing a large partnership or system necessitates considering the different agendas of those who wish to join. A group of artists might have come on board to garner more consistent work, while the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA) could be hoping to engage more effectively with a larger group of parents. The initial building process must aim to find the sweet spot where many people can agree. Some of the effort will require a clear-eyed assessment of who is most critical to the success of the venture and ensuring, to the degree possible, that there can be a sufficient degree of alignment with and agreement from them to move forward. Once the key people are on board and ample time is given for discussion, adjustment and compromise, those who cannot get behind the agenda should be thanked and encouraged to withdraw. They must not hold up forward progress.

From this point on, the effort should be built by working with the willing and adding others who can agree. At the same time, the “bless and release” concept discussed earlier must operate here. Everyone deserves respect and dignity even when they disagree and those who do not sign on now may be in a position to assist or join in later.

### Building a cadre to reinforce ideas and strengthen relationships

Building an initial consensus is a challenge. Reinforcing it and continuing to build it is equally important. In time, some members of the original group will depart and new people will come in and replace them. It will be crucial to remember that the newcomers were not part of the original discussions when ideas and relationships were forged and did not witness compromises being worked out at that time. They need to understand how things developed and why, and they need to be made part of a cohesive group that will help ideas grow and evolve. Sometimes new organizations will be encouraged to join, and their representatives must not be made to feel like second-class citizens. For the relationships and bonds to remain strong, a group of people needs to take responsibility for constant reinforcement of the central ideas and reuniting around shared values.



Sitar Arts Center, Washington, DC

## It is not charity

When programs are designed *for* a specific constituency, it is tempting for those providing the program to think they know what is needed. Indeed, the very word “for” may be part of the problem. “We are designing a wonderful arts education initiative for disadvantaged kids” is perhaps not the best way to build a trusting relationship with those who will be served. The implied spirit of charity, the unilateral approach to program design, and the sense that “we know what is good for *them*” is an immediate turn-off. Programs that are successful are designed *with* target constituencies instead of *for* them. In partnerships, mergers and collaborative systems, the principle is always the same. Lasting linkages are based on mutually developed goals and strategies. Goals, programs and infrastructure grow out of the collective DNA of all the participants.

## Designing and Piloting Programs and Growing Them to Scale

Program design is much more complex when many individuals are involved. Each partner will be working with a set of goals and desires as well as a set of constraints.

Being a good partner means maneuvering to achieve the goals while operating inside boundaries that inevitably exist in partnerships. This calls for flexibility when faced with constraints.

Imagine, for example, that a group is trying to decide how often to provide professional development training for artists who participate in the partnership. The ideal is to have sessions each week. But some of the artists simply don't have the time available to attend that often. The partners might decide to meet monthly but to send a “quick tips for better teaching” newsletter via email each week. Or the group might be able to provide podcasts that artists can review at their own leisure at any time during the week.

While there isn't a checklist that can be ticked through for working through each and every program design challenge, there are ways that a partnership can think through different lenses to predict how program delivery can be optimized:

- **The environment**

Does it support the program? It is surprising how often arts programs are put in settings that are inappropriate – music programs in rooms that have poor acoustics, art programs in spaces with inadequate light, dance programs in cramped halls with cement floors. Sometimes it is simply a question of making the facility needs clear at the outset.

- **The schedule**

The time allocated has to be adequate to accomplish the goals. This means both the duration of the program in days, weeks, months or years and the time allowed for individual sessions. An art program cannot thrive when the time allotted is barely enough to choose materials and clean up.

- **The program providers (both internal and external)**

Program providers have to be properly prepared and trained not only in their specialty but in education.

- **The collaborating entities and individuals**

The program must effectively utilize what the collaborators bring to the table. Using someone with high-level art skills to move chairs is a waste. It is also questionable to utilize slides from a museum collection if children never see the original artwork.

- **The funders**

Funders have to be on board with what is planned. If there are any restrictions on the funding that would preclude certain activities, those restrictions must be honored.

- **The governance structure**

All the pieces need to be in place to develop and approve the proper policies and ensure accountability.

- **The day-to-day decision-making structure**

There needs to be a clear understanding of who is responsible for what so that questions can be directed to the right people and decisions can be made quickly and unequivocally.

## Piloting and scaling

In order to be successful, programs are often piloted to test and improve the systems and personnel. But even once they have been proven successful, the programs will grow and improve over time, often affecting more people and places and incorporating new elements.

This growth in turn leads to a process of scaling for larger numbers. This process will have impact on the collaboration, requiring changes in operational, programmatic and business models, which will have to be adapted.

In the case of the Big Thought example from Dallas in chapter 4, the organization began with performance programs, eventually transforming them into longer residencies and then to a model of working with every grade level in a single school on connected programming involving performances, residencies and workshops. In time and with expanded collaborations, the program was taken from the campus level to the district level with a fully developed program of arts integration available to all 157 elementary schools in the district. The success of this program led to further expansions and resulted in a coordinated system of in-school, after-school and out-of-school offerings.

Throughout this process of “scaling,” the programs changed but so did Big Thought’s role and those of its partners. At one time, the organization was exclusively a provider of unique performances. Over time, it became a partner in residency development and then a coordinator of a large-scale program for linking providers with schools. Ultimately, it became the managing partner of a system involving several hundred partners both in school and community sites. Throughout this process, every aspect of program development, staffing, governance, fund raising, assessment, branding and marketing evolved and changed.

## Getting Started on Mergers and Acquisitions<sup>4</sup>

Thus far, we have focused on how to get started on any kind of collaboration. But mergers and acquisitions are unique in many respects.

There are specific initial steps that should be followed that are likely to lead to success:

- **Conduct organizational reviews**

In order to assess the pros and cons of whether a merger might make sense, each stakeholder will eventually have to know the basic facts about each organization involved. What are the respective missions of the organizations? What programs do they offer? Who and how many do they serve? What are the respective budgets and what has been the financial history over the past few years? What do staffing and governance structures look like? In many mergers, this initial review occurs before any other steps are taken because it can save time if there are obvious barriers that the facts reveal. Sometimes an outside consultant conducts the review.

- **Form a collaboration subcommittee**

A group made up of representatives from each organization's board will be empowered to review information, draft plans and make recommendations. It is important that each participating organization provide influential decision-makers from its board who can cogently represent that entity's views to the subcommittee and at the same time be a convincing advocate for recommendations that the subcommittee will make.

- **Engage a neutral facilitator/consultant**

While there may well be smart, experienced individuals who are part of one or more of the organizations, they will never be regarded as totally objective or neutral. An outsider is necessary to help ensure that institutional or individual egos will not be barriers to decisions that are in the best interests of the organizations' respective constituents. Sometimes it is seen as desirable to engage a consultant at the front end of the process so that he or she can conduct the organizational reviews mentioned above, but one should definitely become involved by this stage.

- **Develop decision-making schedules and a communications plan**

It is important to make clear who will have the authority to make which decisions, who will need to be consulted in advance, who should be informed immediately after decisions are made and how the public will be informed.



Mesa Arts Center, Mesa, AZ

4 Cf. Joe Kluger and Dr. Thomas Wolf, "Mergers and Strategic Alliances", WolfBrown Sounding Board, no. 25 (2009), [bit.ly/NES1Qn](http://bit.ly/NES1Qn).

- **Interview stakeholders**

The facilitator should conduct confidential discussions with key stakeholders to identify opportunities and barriers in negotiation. This includes people within and outside the organizations, including funders.

- **Develop the case**

Based on the organizational reviews and the interviews, the consultant and subcommittee should develop the case for (or against) merger. If the case is for merger, it must address both the community benefit as well as the advantages to the participating organizations.

- **Choose organizational structure options**

Will this be a merger or an acquisition? Will one organization become a subsidiary of the other? What might the final structure look like in terms of governance and staff structure?

- **Identify key policy issues**

These will include mission and program compatibility, organizational culture, governance, board leadership and composition, professional leadership, personnel, branding (including name), office space, approval process and timetable. Each organization will have to see how much change it can accept as the subcommittee and facilitator put options on the table to consider.

Some people believe that the most difficult part of a merger or acquisition is to get the parties to come to final agreement and sometimes that is the case. There will also be other challenges, such as how to convey the storyline to the public once final decisions are made so that people are supportive of the eventual outcome. But these things can happen only if the initial steps leading up to the decision are taken carefully and done well.

## Keeping People Aboard the Moving Train

An entrepreneurial group of people who have designed collaborative strategies to address community challenges can sometimes feel like they are aboard a moving train.

They come together at the train depot and set off on a trip where everyone has agreed upon the destination and the itinerary. But along the way, additional stops may be added to pick up more passengers. Additional cars may become attached. Previously agreed upon stops may be cancelled due to lack of demand or diminished importance. Some people who bought tickets may now feel that the train is not taking them where they want to go. For the train crew, competing demands can feel overwhelming. They have a schedule to keep, and they have promised that the train will arrive at its ultimate destination on time.

Put this in the context of an actual collaborative initiative that began as an arts education program dealing with integrating the arts into classroom teaching. Its initial success sparks great interest and there is a demand to expand it into a comprehensive after-school creative learning program. Part of the redesign includes broadened activities (cooking, gymnastics and science) and new partners focused on the idea of developing the ability to imagine and create.

But some of the original partners who signed on begin asking questions such as “What happened to the arts? What happened to the focus on classroom teachers? That is why we joined this collaboration. It is what we do. It seems like others are moving away from what we agreed upon.”

The Village of Arts and Humanities, Philadelphia, PA



Other people may have had unrealistic expectations in the first place and this change in plans only confirms their worst fears. “Where is the added work and the contracts that we thought would come through the collaboration? Why aren’t you focusing your efforts there?” For both of these groups of partners, the new direction may seem like a betrayal of sorts, while to others it seems just the opposite – an incredible opportunity to expand the program, the partnership, the visibility and the funding opportunities.

Partners need to be ready and willing to discuss these issues frankly and openly. Some activities will inevitably need to be redesigned if the hope is to move to something that is scalable and will have greater impact. New services sometimes will be necessary to advance quality and provide opportunities for enhanced professional development. There may be changes in funder priorities that require new thinking. In entering any collaboration, one gives up the ability to decide things unilaterally. On the other hand, new opportunities may present themselves because of the power and impact made possible by working together.

## Key Questions

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1. Do you have access to credible research that can help you identify community needs on the one hand and trends in arts education on the other?
  2. Have you come up with a powerful idea that is simple, focused, inspirational, achievable and measurable and will hold your coalition together?
  3. Have you built a communications mechanism to keep people on board as the collaborative work develops, evolves and changes?
  4. What are the interpersonal dynamics among those who are important to the success of your endeavor? Can you suggest ways to improve communication?
  5. Do you have a plan for designing and piloting programs and growing them to scale?
  6. If you are contemplating a merger, have you done the proper diagnostic work that will lead to an informed decision? Are the people and processes in place to keep the process from derailing?
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# Chapter 6

## Nurturing Capacities To Support Collaboration



Levine School of Music, Washington, DC

What is the most difficult thing about an effective collaboration? Some claim it is getting them started. Others say the greater challenge is keeping them healthy over a long period of time. As one fatigued administrator put it, “Once the excitement is over, once you are no longer the new kid on the block, once the original funders find the next best thing, once the original charismatic leaders move on, there is a real danger that you will not be able to maintain the vigor and in some cases, things may even fall apart.”

Partnerships, unfortunately, never become self-sufficient, and they require more than high-quality programs. There are a variety of supporting capacities that sustain the operation of collaborations as finely oiled machines. These duties, often different or absent for direct delivery organizations, raise the operating capacity of collaborations so that they can maximize impact.

In this chapter we will discuss:

1. Professional development
2. Formative evaluation
3. Summative evaluation
4. Fund raising
5. Advocacy
6. Administration

## Professional Development (Institutional Support)

Professional development is a form of training that helps people associated with a collaborative program carry out their tasks most effectively.

While professional development is designed for individuals who are responsible for program delivery (e.g., instructors and others with direct contact with students, families and other constituents), almost anyone can benefit, whether they are involved in governance, administration, advocacy or some other aspect of the collaboration.

Professional development evolves from the answers to specific questions:

- What needs are we trying to address?
- What do we want the learners to know, understand and be able to do?
- What do the instructors, implementers and influencers need to learn to be effective in their roles?
- Which of those groups might benefit from some kind of developmental assistance?
- What kind of assistance is appropriate for each group?

The specific kind of professional development will vary depending on the kind of program, where it is located and who is involved in the collaboration. For example, in a system focused on in-school arts learning, it might include:

- An “in service” professional development day for a classroom teacher or other professional certified educator (e.g., librarian, PE teacher, fine arts specialist)
- A special convening for participating principals

- A series of workshops for artists
- An “orientation” session/charrette for trustees and school board members
- An informal after-school session for parents when they pick up their kids
- Conference attendance or a class for nonprofit organization staff members

In a music and health partnership, it might include:

- An artist training session on the nature of the therapeutic setting, types of illness and ways in which music can ease pain, anxiety and stress
- A workshop on techniques for interfacing with patients, doctors and other medical staff
- A “nursing grand rounds” (i.e., professional development training session) to demonstrate how live music can be incorporated into nurses’ work
- A collaborative working session between medical staff and program evaluators on identifying and designing metrics with which to measure the impact of music in clinical settings
- A workshop for fund raising staff on how and to whom to direct special fund raising appeals



The Village of Arts and Humanities, Philadelphia, PA

Topics will grow out of identified needs. A system designed to foster arts learning in elementary classroom settings, for example, might offer professional development sessions that focus on curriculum design, standards-based instruction, arts integration, measuring quality or effective advocacy. Another that provides arts programs for disabled children might include, in addition to sessions on curriculum design and advocacy, workshops on the history and politics of disability policy, legal and ethical issues and effective partnering to raise awareness and extend the impact of the program.

Many of the best professional development sessions include opportunities to observe and critique work. This can occur in real-world settings involving instructors and students or in videos of such interactions edited to reveal situations offering special challenges and opportunities. For example, a classical music organization might provide videos that show how musicians can engage with participants in meaningful ways that go well beyond lecturing and performing.

Professional development sessions are often most effective when they are interactive and provide practical tools and strategies that people can implement the day they walk out of the session. While they should contain big ideas, those ideas should be connected to real-world experiences. General principles are helpful, but the most useful sessions are practical and applicable. Otherwise, experience shows that the material simply doesn’t get used.

Because it can be time-consuming and expensive to design effective professional development, it is often useful to look to other institutions that have professional development programs and staff and purchase services from them. At the very least, it is useful to get lists of those who have a proven track record in offering the kinds of instructions and guidance that will be most useful and to get their advice.

## Formative Evaluation (Program Design Support)

When we hear the word “evaluation,” we often envision our old school report cards that gave us a grade in each of our courses.

Some evaluation is precisely that – a final assessment of the quality of a program, organization or collaboration. But evaluation can also be used at the beginning and during the progress of a program. It can help with front end needs assessment, planning, program design, and course correction and improvement. This is called “formative evaluation.”

Formative evaluation begins with a clear assignment. Is the task primarily about how a program is to be designed, the effectiveness of its delivery and/or the abilities of teaching artists and other personnel? Is it about administrative capacity and follow-through? Is it intended to focus on the structure and effectiveness of the collaboration? Is it about governance? Is it some combination of all of these things?

Several aspects of formative evaluation give it power and, in combination, they are especially effective.

- **Research and access to outside information**

Formative evaluation may provide important contextual information, including examples of best practices from other sites, a literature review that identifies articles and books that could shed light on activities or organizational structure and interviews with field leaders and/or funders that might indicate important trends.

- **Goal formation and program design**

Formative evaluation can sharpen the articulation of goals and outcomes that in turn help refine the design of programs. This is one reason why it is useful to involve evaluators early in the life of a collaboration. Even when an evaluator joins after these things have been developed, he or she can help improve them. An evaluator might ask, “What are you really going after here? Is there a way you can articulate that more clearly? Is this the most effective way to do it? In three other places I have visited, they have had success doing it this way.”

- **In-depth observation**

Depending on the type of program being offered, the evaluator will go on site and actually observe activities and talk to instructors, administrators and, sometimes, students and parents. He or she may look at the materials that are used and assess their quality and utility, as well as evaluate the appropriateness of the space, the support provided by the host institution and the level of engagement of participants. Nothing substitutes for this in-depth level of scrutiny.

- **Reporting and discussion**

Good formative evaluation is like a conversation. The evaluator may bring information in the form of frequent short reports or discussions with participants to share findings and observations. Often an evaluator goes back into the field to assess whether progress has been made and changes put in place after the initial reporting.

People who do formative evaluation must be experts in the relevant field of activity, they must have a keen eye, and they must be experienced in observation. They also should possess a high degree of objectivity and come to the task free of predispositions concerning the people involved, the program philosophy or any approach that could bias the work.

They need to be able to balance the positives and the negatives so they can be helpful without completely discouraging participants. They must command the trust of those they work for but have the courage to be honest when things are not going well. In collaborative ventures, evaluators must be discreet about what they say, to whom and when.

Indeed, while openness is generally a sound way to cement trust in any collaborative venture, the frankness of what an evaluator says and to whom is crucial. There may be sensitive information that they should not share beyond a certain group. The evaluator can put this into a side letter or confidential report. Collective access to the balance of the evaluator's findings and a willingness to discuss them openly builds cohesion and trust.

## Summative Evaluation (Impact Support)

While formative evaluation is very useful in helping to make things go well initially and improve them later on, there is generally also a need for a more rigorous final assessment of whether the goals and desired outcomes of a particular program or initiative have been achieved.

“Final” is a relative term since it can occur at the end of the first phase of a project, at the end of the first year, at the end of a multi-year grant period or at project completion.

Unlike formative evaluation, which is generally based largely (though not exclusively) on qualitative observations and discussion, summative evaluation more often is tilted toward analysis of quantitative measures. Those measures relate directly to the goals. For example, if the goal is academic improvement, then the metric may well be standardized test scores. In a juvenile detention setting, a measure might be the reduction in the number of disruptive incidents initiated by those in the target group. Once data is collected on these measures, it can be statistically evaluated to determine the significance of the results. In recent years, there has been a movement among arts education evaluators to find measures that more truly reflect arts-related goals rather than always relying on indirect measures like standardized tests in non-arts areas. An example of such a metric might be monitoring the number of hours of free time students devote to arts activities. Another might be the number of times patients use music to reduce stress or pain outside of their hospital visits.

### Measuring impact

To measure impact, summative evaluation will often look for positive change over time. For example, did student grades in core subjects improve between the start and end of the program? Alternatively it might look for differences in results between a target group involved in a program and another similar group that was not involved (a so-called control group). Statistical analysis will reveal whether these differences rise to a level of significance. Unfortunately, these methodological ideals are not always possible. Sometimes there is no perfect quantitative indicator that will persuade people that the program was effective. In other cases, evaluators are brought in too late to get initial readings at the beginning of a program or set up a control group. In still other cases, it may only be possible to measure a population once (as is often the case with incarcerated populations). Sometimes the number of people in the target group is so small that it is difficult to demonstrate statistical significance. Most often, there are so many other variables influencing the lives of those being tested that it is hard to ascribe causality to the intervention you are studying.

Big Thought, Dallas, TX

Because of these difficulties, it is always best to involve the evaluator in the initial design of a program so that he or she can identify potential problems in advance and, to the extent possible, set parameters that are practically measurable and will likely show impact. For example, in many cases there are sources of standardized data on student populations, on the incarcerated, hospital patient populations and the homeless. Rather than having to set up a control group and collect additional data, using existing data from a public agency will suffice. But this means setting up the original target measures so that they align with what the agency has collected.



There is also the practical difficulty of getting permission to study different populations or secure their scores on standardized measures. The restrictions on “human subject research” have become more rigorous in recent years. Considerable time (and often assistance from key individuals within the permission-granting institutions) is required. This is one of the advantages of working in a collaborative structure. Often the permission grantors are part of the partnership or system or can be lobbied by people they know who are involved.

### Dashboards, data points and other ways to tell the story

We all know what a car dashboard looks like. It has several gauges measuring a variety of things that indicate whether the car is running normally and all systems are doing what is expected. The term “dashboard” is often used in evaluation as well. A metaphorical “gauge” is set up to measure progress on a particular outcome. Summative evaluation is conducted partly to measure success in “moving the needle” on the gauge. Simple and attractive as this idea may seem in the abstract, many of the intractable problems that arts education programs are set up to address are slow to change (and they may not change very much in a year or two); so dashboards, if they are used at all, need to be designed around measures where change will come quickly and reliably.

The dashboard is attractive given its simplicity and the ease of presenting data. Indeed, what most people are seeking from the evaluation is straightforward and simple data points that represent gains or indicate their absence. While it is important to provide a certain level of detail consistent with quality research practices, it is the job of the evaluator and the participating organizations to translate raw data into a snapshot that can be easily digested. It takes practice to determine how best to accomplish this. Some organizations find great results with a simple narrative, like in a brochure, while others find that charts paint a more complete picture, like in an annual report. Others find that presentations are the best way to explain data, delivered person-to-person. It’s important to experiment with these methods of communication while taking into account feedback from those who receive it. When data is presented accurately and efficiently, a range of stakeholders will be able to ascertain what the data is telling them about the partnership’s goals and understand its import.

It is tempting, especially in studies that are conducted over long periods of time, to wait on reporting until all data from the various data collection efforts is gathered and there is a “complete” message. The very term “summative” to describe the evaluation suggests this course. However, it is also important to be good stewards not only with money but with information, taking the time to let partners and donors know what has been found, even if the gains are not extraordinary. This is advisable not only to provide mile-markers but also to determine if the partnership must change course either in its evaluation techniques, what is being measured or even the structure of programming.

## Costs

The budget for evaluation should be established from the earliest moment in planning for collaborative work. Since it is extremely unusual that funders will provide grants specifically for evaluation, it must be considered one of the basic costs. Evaluation typically can range from between 5 percent and 15 percent of total costs and can cost more at the outset or if the activity is small scale.

With so many practical challenges with summative evaluation, why do it? Very simply, summative evaluation is crucial if you need to demonstrate and make visible the impact of the program's activities. Testimonials are fine and enthusiasm is satisfying, but, in an age of heightened accountability, they are rarely enough. Summative evaluation provides a level of accountability to partners and investors (funders) and can help people decide whether and how to continue a program and, possibly, to increase its impact.

## Fund Raising (Financial Support)

When it comes to raising money, the evidence is overwhelming and reaffirms the central thesis of earlier chapters.

Programs that are built around broad goals that speak to community concerns often increase the number of potential funders and the amount of their support.

### Lessons in Learning

#### Private Philanthropist

One of America's most generous and high-profile female philanthropists was approached a few years ago by the artistic director of a concert presenting organization that provided music enrichment programs for schools. When artists came to town to give public performances, they were often invited to stay an extra day and do performances in local schools. Would she support some of these school programs?

The donor, who had been the subject of a biography and several profiles on national television, was known for her outspokenness. Yet even knowing this, the artistic director was not prepared for her response: "My answer is no," she said. "I do not support SOB's." When the executive director looked puzzled, she explained: "You know – SOB's – symphony, opera, ballet. I only help those who really need it. Arts organizations have plenty of rich supporters and don't need another one."

Today, that same philanthropist is the largest single donor to the organization. What changed? The auditorium-based musical exposure and enrichment activities had been replaced by intensive after-school instrumental and ensemble instruction opportunities for teenagers, many of whom came out of rural poverty. The program provided instruments to those who could not afford them, and the visiting musicians provided inspiration and encouragement to hard-working young people involved in weekly activities.

"I support this program not because it is a music program," explained the philanthropist. "I support it because of what it is doing for kids. Every hour that they spend practicing and rehearsing and studying is an hour they are not out on the street, being tempted by drugs or getting into trouble. These kids are going to succeed in life because they have learned how to work hard, master a task and pursue ambitious goals."

In addition to the focus on community goals, being part of a collaboration can provide another advantage in resource development: it leads to a more diversified funding mix. A broad coalition can often bring in revenue from different sources for all kinds of purposes and activities. Different partners may bring various funding streams and contacts that can strengthen the group financially.



Creativity Explored, San Francisco, CA

## Earned income

One of the income streams that is overlooked frequently, but can be very important, is earned income. Earned income can derive from contracts for services, the sale of products, admission fees or other sources. An example of a contract for services is a school district purchasing a residency program from an arts education provider, or a university education department purchasing the services of a teaching artist for classroom instruction. Admission fees might include tickets sold to a student concert or admission to an exhibition. Sale of products can include artwork made by constituents or items from a gift shop. An interesting example of the former is provided by Creativity Explored in San Francisco.

## Creativity Explored San Francisco, California

## Lessons in Learning

Creativity Explored ([www.creativityexplored.org](http://www.creativityexplored.org)) is a San Francisco-based nonprofit that provides artists with developmental disabilities the means to create, exhibit and sell their art. The organization celebrates the value of collaboration, which creates new and exciting opportunities for its artists both nationally and internationally while also benefiting the partnering organizations.

Earned income has long been a fundamental part of the revenue stream of Creativity Explored. The earned income is mission related: it provides studio artists the opportunity to earn money from the sale of their artwork and in some cases to pursue livelihoods as visual artists.

Earned income is also a part of the organization's business model. What is not paid to artists helps offset operating costs, and because such earned income is unrestricted, it can pay for things that many grants will not – rent, phone and computers. Earned income is also a magnet for contributed funds. It demonstrates a demand for the products that are created by artists with disabilities, lending credibility to the quality of their work and the program that supports them. As a result, earned income offers a healthy diversification from an exclusive reliance on government and grant funds and thereby contributes to long-term sustainability.

The amount and specific mix of funding will always be dependent upon a variety of factors, but one thing is clear – the greater the number and variety of partners in a collaboration, the more sources of funding the collaboration will be able to access. Some partners might be strong in donations from individuals – generally the most reliable source of ongoing unrestricted contributed support. Others may rely more heavily on government grants (whether local, state, federal or some combination of all three). Foundations may be strong supporters of certain collaborations while corporate support may play a significant role in others. Some may be strong on fund raising events. The more different kinds of support there are, generally speaking, the greater the sustainability of the effort. If one source dries up, you do not have all your eggs in that basket.

There are other considerations that have an impact on how much money can be raised, which may lead you to add new players to strengthen a collaboration:

### Location

In most cases, large urban areas have more funders, especially institutional funders. For rural programs, an urban partner can sometimes enhance fundability. But it works the other way as well. Sometimes an urban collaboration can enhance fundability if those it serves include rural at-risk populations.

### Public versus private

It is difficult to raise private dollars for public sector entities. Individuals generally feel uncomfortable making contributions directly to government programs, and many institutional donors are legally constrained from doing so. That is why many public sector collaborations have private sector partners that can raise funds on their behalf. Sometimes the fund raising private partner is one of the organizations that is delivering programs and providing on-the-ground staff and instructors. On other occasions, the partner is simply responsible for fund raising.



ASU Herberger Institute for Design & the Arts, Community Division, Tempe, AZ

### Maturity of program

New entities are less attractive to many funders than ones that have a proven track record. In some cases, grant guidelines specify a minimum number of years of operation before an applicant is eligible for support. For new collaborations, it can be useful to incubate activities within the corporate structure of one of the existing partners so long as that partner's own fund raising is not jeopardized. For mergers and acquisitions, it makes sense to retain an existing 501(c)(3) structure rather than to create a new one for the same reason.

### Size of partnership/system/merged organization

Scale is important to funders as is impact. Larger entities with more ambitious goals may be more attractive than smaller ones. For young entrepreneurs who practice venture philanthropy, the concept of growing initiatives to scale is part of their giving philosophy.

### Longevity

In thinking about the relationship between funding and sustainability, it will be important to evaluate every funding source for its potential longevity. Some funders will be one-timers – in for a fiscal year, never to return. Others may also give only once, but their funding may be for several years' duration. Still others will be episodic – in one year, out the next, but likely to return from time to time. Long-term funders, those who provide money predictably year after year, are generally the most valuable, especially as a program or collaboration matures and becomes less glitzy. While individuals can be a major source of ongoing funding (and can often be convinced to give unrestricted gifts), for many larger-scale collaborations, it will be the public sector that provides the largest amount of ongoing stable funding.

“We think that advocacy is the act of convincing people of your point of view, but it’s not ... it’s getting people to change their actions, which are based in beliefs. Advocacy is changing what people believe, not what they think.”

– Eric Booth, Arts Learning Consultant, Author  
(Interview, October 7, 2011)

## Advocacy (Policy and Public Support)

According to one dictionary, advocacy is the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something such as a cause, an idea, an activity or a policy.

It is also the ability to demonstrate active support for that cause or activity. Advocacy has both the persuading component and the support component. Some leaders need to make the case. Many others need to support it.

Advocacy can take place on a very small scale and be as simple as one person convincing another of the merits of a particular idea. Imagine an arts education organization attempting to gain access to a children’s psychiatric ward in a hospital to offer art programs. While the administrative staff is enthusiastic, the supervising physician is resisting, claiming it is diverting the time and attention of the staff and adding stress to their lives. One small act of advocacy is needed to change his mind. It may be as simple as a conversation with the individual pointing out the clinical evidence that shows how art can reduce anxiety and stress in patients and staff. In other words, advocacy would involve developing a campaign of information that demonstrates that the intervention will accomplish the wellness goals of the hospital plus other benefits.

Advocacy often happens on a much larger scale. While it can be used as a strategy in support of funding, it can be just as important in trying to affect policy. For example, as arts education partnerships and systems develop, they often run into policies that hamper their growth and effectiveness. One partnership recently mobilized advocates to “educate” state legislators about the unintended consequences of enacting a law that would require organizations delivering after-school programming to acquire a separate license for each location in which they operated. The consequence of the legislation would have required a full-time staff person for the partnership simply to handle the paper work for individual licensees in dozens of locations. By forming a coalition with many other agencies like Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, state After-School Networks, and others, a compromise was worked out. Influential board members’ visits to legislators combined with practitioner testimony at public hearings saved the day. An amendment was drafted that allowed a waiver for those agencies already licensed to work in schools.



Community School of Music and Arts, Mountain View, CA

There is often both a carrot and stick element to advocacy. An arts education consortium may wish to get time in the school day for a special program. In approaching a principal or a school board, the carrot could be: “We have the funding...” The stick – or the consequence of a refusal – could be: “Here is the list of parents who are ready to testify in support of the program. Many are your biggest supporters. We are sure you do not want to disappoint them.”

In advocacy, the people who present the case can be as important as what they say.

In the case of the school program, the president of the PTA (or even an articulate parent), an area director or a community funder can be convincing advocates. In the case of work on the state law involving licensing, influential board members of the nonprofits who were also campaign contributors testified at hearings. But the case itself has to be compelling. Providing practical information, fact sheets and statistics, as well as being able to draft legislative language can all help advance an idea at the best possible moment, before a decision has been made.

## Administration (Coordination Support)

Management and administration are crucial to any complex endeavor. But they are particularly challenging in a collaborative structure.

For that reason, they must be part of the architecture from the beginning. Ironically, the better the administration of a program, the more invisible it becomes to people on the outside. Yet the great benefit of sound and effective administration is that it frees people up to do good work.

The architectural design of administration, like that of a building, begins with the superstructure. In partnerships and systems, this requires clarity on how organizations will relate to one another, who is responsible for what, and the chains of decision-making authority. At a more granular level, an organization chart will show where people report and whom they supervise; job descriptions will detail what they can be expected to do. Because of the complexity of collaborations, it is important to ensure regular performance reviews based on these expectations. They allow supervisors to tell those who work for them whether they are meeting expectations as well as providing an opportunity for those in the trenches to provide feedback on what is working well and where there are problems.

One of the biggest differences between the administration of a single organization and the administration of collaborations is that, with the latter, there is a need to deal with issues across multiple entities. While it may be a simple matter to say, “We will deal with administrative issues collectively,” it can be the Achilles’ heel of many collaborations, given the need to streamline and make countless decisions quickly. And even when collective decision-making is the method of choice, it needs to be spelled out clearly in practical terms. Does it mean that every organizational partner gets one vote when it comes to important administrative decisions? And who decides what constitutes an “important decision”?

For the most part, there are two effective approaches to administration. One is to assign administration to a managing partner. The other is to arrange for a division of labor, with different entities assuming distinct roles in administration. Either way, formal and informal methods of ongoing communication and accountability are important so that procedures work smoothly and well and partners have an opportunity to raise concerns.

## Customer service

Those involved in developing the administrative support for program delivery must take constituents into account. They must balance the need for efficiency with both customer service and accountability. As the following example makes clear, even something as simple as having a live person available at all times to answer the phone may be an important technique to assure the general public that the collaboration still has a human face.

### Community Arts School

### Lessons in Learning

When two community arts schools merged in the early years of the 21st century, they hired a consultant to recommend ways they might increase efficiency and cut costs. Among the suggestions was the idea of replacing the two receptionists (who mostly answered incessant phone calls) with a voicemail system. The consultant also recommended that instead of having multiple people talking to parents of prospective students about their options, that a single individual be given that job and that specific times be set aside for that task. This would increase efficiency, enhance accountability and ensure that everyone was being given consistent information in a fair and equitable way, including information about fees and payment plans.

The new system was implemented and at first it seemed to be a success. The school saved money by deploying fewer staff people. Then, one day, a faculty member got a call on her cell phone after coming home from the school. The caller was an acquaintance who turned out to be the grandparent of a prospective student.

“You teach at the community arts school, right? You are about to lose a student. My daughter is disgusted. She has called repeatedly, gotten voicemail, cannot find anyone to whom she can direct questions and after one brief conversation about offerings, she cannot reach the individual she talked to. If she is this angry, there must be others.”

Indeed, the system that had been implemented had been efficient and cost-effective for the school, but customer service had been sacrificed. Instead of a friendly receptionist at the end of the line who answered incoming calls and made parents feel welcome, there was now a voicemail system that was as confusing as it was frustrating. There was no one who could answer general questions about the school and connect callers with the proper person. Furthermore, because only one person was taking parents' calls, she was often on the phone with others and unable to call back in a timely fashion.



Luna Dance Institute, Berkeley, CA

## Technology

Increasingly, technological solutions to address the requirements of administration are available and innovative entrepreneurs are developing new applications all the time. There are countless financial management packages as well as systems for fund raising, ticketing and registration. Some of the more sophisticated ones are expensive, but one of the advantages of a collaboration is that participants can pool resources and afford what is beyond the capability of a single entity. Sometimes, though, the information management requirements are so specialized that it is impossible to find appropriate software, and because the market for an application can be limited, there is little hope that a commercial developer will want to take on the project. In these cases, a collaboration may be the best way to get the software developed.

## Lessons in Learning

### Active Network

When Active Network ([www.activenetwork.com](http://www.activenetwork.com)), a for-profit company, launched an integrated registration system, it was the result of a long-term collaboration involving seven community music schools. They had come together in 2004 to address the much-discussed issue of the lack of such a system and finally decided to do something about it. Initial members of the consortium included MacPhail Center for Music (Minneapolis), Levine School of Music (Washington, DC), Neighborhood Music School (New Haven), Third Street Music School Settlement (New York), Cleveland Music School Settlement and Wisconsin Conservatory of Music (Milwaukee). A seventh partner, Merit School of Music (Chicago), joined a few years later.

These schools together formed an LLC and funded the development of the comprehensive online registration system (including a student database, on-line registration, facilities management, scheduling and marketing components). Through the process, the consortium worked with two different developers, bringing it to completion with Active Network, which then agreed to market, install and support the system. Consortium members contributed more than \$700,000 over the years to bring this project to fruition. The system was put in use by consortium members at their various sites while its individual modules were marketed by Active Network.

## Other administrative areas

There are many areas of administration that must be kept in focus. Financial accountability and the details of financial management (e.g., handling money, making payments, developing controls and approvals and budgeting systems) are crucial. Effective administration also requires constant monitoring of bureaucratic procedures to assure that they are not onerous and reducing red tape when possible. With publicity and promotion, effective strategies can enhance the visibility not only of the collaboration but also of all those who participate in it. However, clear agreements need to be established on branding and the need to respect the independent brands while providing a clear identity for the collaboration.

## Key Questions

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1. Do you have adequate professional development for those who could benefit from it? Is it practical, targeted and effective?
  2. Do you have mechanisms for formative evaluation that can help you design and improve activities and organizational structures?
  3. Have you commissioned summative evaluation that is based on hard data? Are the goals you are assessing reasonable given the scope and duration of your activities?
  4. Have you achieved diversified revenue streams that include assurances of long-term funding? Have you articulated the case for support in a way that makes the best use of broad goals and the strength of the coalition?
  5. What are the key areas where advocacy would be most useful? Who should be approached and who should make the case? Who can you mobilize to support it?
  6. Is your administration designed to address the complexities of working with others? Do your systems address efficiency, customer service requirements and accountability?
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Progressive Arts Alliance, Cleveland, OH

# Afterword



Young Audiences New York, New York, NY

In these pages, we have described a particular route to greater organizational impact and sustainability that is based on strong collaborations that address community needs. Our hypothesis, borne out through the many examples we have offered and others, is that strong collaborations, when anchored in broadly shared aspirations, lead to organizations that are more relevant to their communities over longer periods of time. This appears to be true whether we are talking about simple two-way partnerships, mergers or large-scale collaborative systems involving scores of organizations and agencies. It holds up whether the goals relate to equity, public safety, youth leadership, workforce development, quality health care or a host of others aspirations serving the common good.

In these pages, we have also described what is required to get collaborations started and to support them. Fostering sustainable collaboration is more complex and demanding than having an inspirational mission statement and finding partners. Collaborations require many other things, including adequate financial nourishment, sufficient human capital, suitable leadership and proper oversight.

There are three remaining big ideas about sustainability that we believe are worth calling out by name to complete the picture we have painted. They are authenticity, flexibility and quality. As people assemble the building blocks of strong collaborations, these principles must be part of the mortar that holds the structures together.

## Authenticity

Authenticity can be found at two levels – the level of the institution and that of individuals.

“Don’t compromise yourself.  
You are all you’ve got.”

– Janis Joplin

At the institutional level, those who speak for a collaboration must resist the temptation to promise more from it than what it can reasonably achieve. There will always be pressure to deliver big and dramatic results and, when money or prestige is at stake, it is easy to succumb. Occasionally there will be legal ramifications to claiming more than is true – a contract or a grant may be conditional on what was promised. More often the issue is a moral one. Can anyone with a straight face claim that a single theater experience for a group of juvenile offenders will reduce recidivism? Can we promise that a series of art classes will make all fourth graders better readers? Of course not. When we say such things and the results turn out to be meager, we have crossed a line. We will have to live with our consciences and also with more practical consequences. When word gets out that we cannot deliver, next time the support will not be there and sustainability will be in jeopardy.

At the individual level there also needs to be honesty and authenticity. All participants must acknowledge what they do well, what they are trained to do, and what others can do better. A performing musician in a hospital setting is not a music therapist – the skills are different, as are the potential outcomes. An artist in a school is qualified and trained to supplement the role of an art teacher or a classroom teacher, not to supplant it. If collaborations are going to endure, there needs to be trust that people will walk the walk and talk the talk in ways that are honest to whom they are and what they do well.

It should also be noted that if partnerships had personalities, authenticity might very well be the most prized character trait. The influencers, programmers, implementers and beneficiaries are all acutely aware of those who are not working in a genuine way to help communities thrive. Once people lose sight of a community's desired outcomes, the partnership will cease its synergistic power and will once again become about the competing agendas running counter to the spirit of partnership.

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

– George Bernard Shaw

## Flexibility

A second important attribute that will contribute to sustainability is flexibility.

Change will always be with us. We already encountered several examples of it in the chapter on systems – changes in leadership, in funding or in internal capacities. But there are many other changes that can have an impact. Few anticipated the September 11, 2001 attacks on our country or the deep recession that threatened so many nonprofit organizations in the decade that followed. Similarly, many people did not understand how the growing divisiveness of our political discourse, the rapid rise of social media or the changing place of arts education in school reform would influence the environment in which they operate.

Most effective leaders understand that change is messy and human – but not necessarily bad. Changes have presented both opportunities and threats to the most successful collaborations. They have served as occasions to rethink, reposition and, in some cases, restructure. Change often brings about realignments among organizations, which can offer windows of opportunity – often rather brief – when collaborations can capture new ground, funding and credibility. Such achievements not only require the flexibility to adapt but an ability to convince others of the wisdom of striking while the iron is hot. Persuasion is often the harder challenge.

The problem of course is that change always carries with it some risk and many prefer taking the safe road. Yet, sometimes doing nothing is not the safest path forward. Many arts education organizations did not properly read the trend of schools' increased emphasis on standardized testing in reading and mathematics. Others did not understand the impact an increase in standards-based instruction would have on so-called enrichment programs. By failing to change, some lost market share for their offerings while others were responding and adapting. Similarly, some have adjusted to what has been the shift in emphasis among some educators and funders from arts learning to a broader emphasis on creative learning. They saw an opportunity for an alternative to a singular focus on a narrow curriculum and testing culture, augmenting it with arts education and creative learning aimed at 21st century workforce development and other community goals. In this they were ahead of their competition. Their flexibility to adapt and change was an essential component of their success, leading to long-term sustainability.

## Quality/Excellence

The term “quality” and its over-used linguistic partner “excellence” are frequently misunderstood when applied to the arts and arts education.

They are often intended to capture a standard of high technical execution, a level of professionalism or a degree of external critical acceptance. One or the other of these terms (or something closely equivalent) can be found in the mission statements of most arts organizations. Yet the sustainability of many organizations is at risk. They aspire toward being the best they can be but they find themselves struggling to find audiences, community relevance and ultimately the resources to survive. Perhaps some organizations are too narrowly focused on artistic excellence and not focused enough on community needs and desires.

In the case of arts and cultural education, the issue is particularly urgent. It is perfectly appropriate to provide artistic training that will help students win art competitions, become published playwrights, play their instruments flawlessly or execute the perfect pirouette. The problem is that even those who provide this kind of training and are considered to be at the top of their respective fields are being asked for something more in today’s world. It will not be enough for most of their students to master an art form at the highest level of proficiency. They will need to learn how to relate to audiences or readers or viewers or students in a meaningful way. They will have to design offerings that speak directly to people, whoever and wherever they are. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, it matters less how good they are and more what their “customers” will take from the experience.

Of course, the majority of arts education programs are not designed to produce professional practitioners and so the definition of quality and excellence is already more nuanced. Practitioners know that they have to address the needs of their constituents more directly. For the best of them, “high quality” will include some standards of proficiency, but it will also include goals relating to enjoyment, fulfillment, confidence, the acquisition of life skills and other non-artistic elements. At the same time, they will also seek excellence in program delivery and management and the development of policy.

In the end, it is this multifaceted definition of quality and excellence – along with authenticity and flexibility – that matters. Pursued vigorously by well-managed collaborations, these will be major contributors to success and long-term sustainability.

“Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out.”

– Peter Drucker

## Conclusion

Virtually every nonprofit organization begins with a powerful gesture.

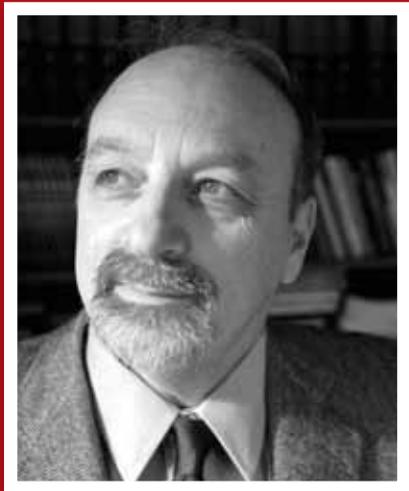
Someone decides that the ills of society are not immutable and begins a journey to remedy the bad with the good. This idealism is a powerful driving force. Yet the truth remains that many nonprofits come into the world and soon disappear. Others stay around in name only, their idealism not powerful enough to change – or sometimes even make a dent in – complicated issues such as public education, health care, criminal justice and human rights.

Collaboration – whether through partnerships, mergers or systems – is an important strategy to sustain idealism. As nonprofit workers go about their many tasks and activities, their idealism may be hard to track. Their challenges are immense, the work arduous and the changes constant. But the collaboration business model is, in fact, as idealistic as it gets. Organizations come together believing that with the help of others in their community, things can truly begin to change for the better. And not for a dozen children here or there or in small ways, but in tangible, palpable ways that can renew cities, states or even countries for generations.



*Dances for a Variable Population, New York, NY. Photo: Sally Cohen.*

# About the Authors



Thomas Wolf

Dr. Thomas Wolf's career spans over four decades and encompasses the fields of philanthropy, education and the arts. A principal with WolfBrown (an international consulting firm which he helped establish in 1983), he also served as the founding Director of the New England Foundation for the Arts. Originally trained as a musician, he made his debut as flute soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the age of sixteen and played professionally for many years. He became involved in arts education as a performer, then as an administrator, later as a board member and finally as a consultant.

Wolf holds a doctorate in education from Harvard University and has taught at Harvard and Boston University. He has also served as an elementary school principal and a high school music teacher. His many books include *Managing a Nonprofit Organization* (now in its fourth edition), *Presenting Performances*, *And the Band Stopped Playing* (with Nancy Glaze), and two books on the arts and education written with his wife, Dr. Dennie Palmer Wolf: *The Arts Go to School* and *Academic Preparation in the Arts*.



Gigi Antoni

Giselle "Gigi" Antoni has served since 1995 as Executive Director, then President/CEO, of Dallas-based Big Thought. Ms. Antoni was named a Champion of Change by the White House for her convening role in Thriving Minds, a citywide creative learning system with more than 100 partners.

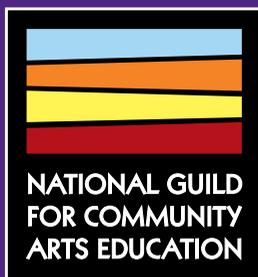
Antoni works as a consultant to cities and nonprofits across the U.S. and abroad and has served on many local, state and national committees, boards and juries. In 2010, she was honored with the National Leadership Award from the National Guild for Community Arts Education. In 2005, she was selected for the prestigious Local Hero award, given by Bank of America. She is a Fellow of the British-American Project, which promotes sharing and exchange between top young leaders from each country. Her alma maters are Stephen F. Austin State University, the University of Texas at Arlington and the Drama Studio London at Berkeley where she graduated with distinction. Antoni resides in Dallas with her husband Dana Mullen and daughter Analise.

# About the Publishers



For 25 years, Big Thought has provided creative learning programs that help kids imagine possibilities, excel academically and contribute to their community.

Driven by its mission to make imagination a part of everyday learning, Big Thought develops programs that address academic achievement and youth development by connecting classroom objectives and traditional teaching methods with arts, culture and creative learning. Through its partnerships, Big Thought serves more than 100,000 Dallas children, families and teachers each year, both in and out of the classroom. Annually, Big Thought also delivers more than one million hours of programming and individual creative instruction. A model to cities across America, Big Thought has achieved national recognition, including the Americans for the Arts “2009 Arts in Education Award” and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities “Coming Up Taller Award” in 2004. In 2011, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities selected Big Thought President/CEO Gigi Antoni as a “Champion of Change,” serving on a White House panel highlighting best practices in arts education. Learn more at [www.bigthought.org](http://www.bigthought.org)



Founded in 1937, the National Guild for Community Arts Education is the leading service organization for community arts education providers in the United States.

Our mission is to support and advance access to lifelong learning opportunities in the arts. We pursue this mission primarily by fostering the creation and development of nonprofit arts institutions and government agencies that ensure community-wide access to arts education. Today, the National Guild provides essential research and information resources, professional development and networking opportunities, advocacy, funding, and high-profile leadership. Members include community schools of the arts; arts centers; and arts education divisions of performing arts institutions, universities, museums, local arts agencies and other organizations. The National Guild is guided by the vision that all Americans will understand and appreciate the value of the arts in their lives and in the lives of their communities. Learn more at [www.nationalguild.org](http://www.nationalguild.org)



**Collaboration is a powerful strategy for arts education organizations to become stronger, more relevant and sustainable and find affordable, effective solutions for addressing community needs.**

Any nonprofit can benefit from an effective partnership that is built on best-practice strategies which have proven successful for organizations across the United States.

*More Than the Sum of Its Parts* is a primer on how organizations that offer arts education and creative learning programs can initiate, enter into, and support long-lasting partnerships. It outlines the theory and practice underlying different levels of collaboration — from organizational partnerships to mergers to community-wide systems — with inspiring, real-life examples of thriving partnerships whose creative strategies multiply the benefits of arts education and help sustain their own work for years to come.